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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

SCIENCE FICTION

A KING SIZE
PUBLICATION



EMSH-

WEDNESDAY'S CHILD by William Tenn
THE MINORITY REPORT by Philip K. Dick
KEEPERS OF THE HOUSE by Lester del Rey

THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

I HAVE OFTEN THOUGHT that the most imaginatively audacious word in the whole of modern lexicography is one which has only come of age, so to speak, in the last ten or fifteen years. It is not a slang word, or a native colloquialism, or even a highly technical word, although it sounds technical. It does, however, embrace so wide a range of hair-trigger speculation on the frontiers of the marvellous that it can be said to combine slang's bright insouciance with the soberer insights of a constantly advancing technology. Not to keep you in further suspense—the philological jewel I have in mind is “extrapolate.”

I wonder if you know precisely what it means. Very few people do, and to define it precisely would require a kind of sixty-four-thousand-dollar-question wizardry. Most dictionaries define it as a deliberate and audacious attempt to appraise values which have so great a magnitude and range that they lie completely outside the boundaries of the known. When you extrapolate you boldly jettison every apostle of systematic thought from Euclid and Aristotle to the most sure-footed of the great modern physicists.

For a starter you enlist under the ESP banners of Dr. Rhine, perhaps—or embrace the “time-slit” hypothesis of Dunn. But you don’t even have to start cautiously. You can simply throw your imagination outward to the stars or inward to thought’s center of gravity in the mysterious blue immensity which surges triumphant within the paradoxically narrow confines of the human skull.

And in this month’s most unusual cover illustration the gifted Emsh has done just that. With an adroit imaginative selectivity—how easily he could have succumbed to the Bug-eyed Monster fallacy!—he has shown us a world of strangeness and wonder and terror within a single drop of water. And what is really staggering in his extrapolation is the presence on the scene of two *human* voyagers—a man and a woman who have defied the unknown by descending in microscopic “spaceships” to investigate creatures even more terrifying than the deep-sea denizens which Mr. Beebe observed from his bathysphere.

The *realness* of these creatures is their most astounding asset. They are so naturally the kind of writhing, formidable horrors you’d expect to find in a drop of water under the circumstances depicted here. A biological departure on any plane can be frightening when it is delineated with scientific sobriety and care, and Emsh has spared no pains to extrapolate with an accuracy wholly adult.

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By **RICHARD JOHNS**

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Paul Harvey Hails New Way For Deaf To Hear Clearly Again

NEW YORK CITY (Special)—A sensational new discovery in the miracle science of electronics that helps the hard-of-hearing hear clearly again was hailed by Paul Harvey, famous news commentator, on his American Broadcasting Co. broadcast Sunday night.

Harvey revealed that this new discovery helps even those suffering a severe hearing loss to hear again with unbelievable clearness. It is so revolutionary it makes vacuum-tube hearing aids obsolete. Nothing shows in the ear except a tiny, almost invisible device.

"This new invention changes the lives of the hard-

of-hearing overnight," Harvey said. "I've seen it happen to someone I know intimately."

Harvey urged his listeners to find out how this amazing discovery can bring new happiness and success to their loved ones who need better hearing.

To acquaint readers of this magazine with this new way to hear clearly again, a fascinating book with complete facts will be sent free, in a plain wrapper. No cost or obligation. Send your request on a postcard to Electronic Research Director, Dept. LHZ, Beltone Hearing Aid Co., 400 Madison Avenue, New York 17, New York.

the minority report

by . . . Philip K. Dick

The precogs sat in darkness and explored chill hinterlands of future crime. How infallible was their frightening gift of prophecy?

THE FIRST thought Anderton had when he saw the young man was: *I'm getting bald. Bald and fat and old.* But he didn't say it aloud. Instead, he pushed back his chair, got to his feet, and came resolutely around the side of his desk, his right hand rigidly extended. Smiling with forced amiability, he shook hands with the young man.

"Witwer?" he asked, managing to make the query sound gracious.

"That's right," the young man said. "But the name's Ed to you, of course. That is, if you share my dislike for needless formality." The look on his blond, overly-confident face showed that he considered the matter settled. It would be Ed and John: everything would be agreeably cooperative right from the start."

"Did you have much trouble finding the building?" Anderton asked guardedly, ignoring the too-friendly overture. *Good God, he had to hold on to something.* Fear touched him and he began to sweat. Witwer was moving around the office as if he already owned it—

Some three or four years ago an exceptionally brilliant group of quite young writers brought a fresh approach and, despite their youth, an ever advancing maturity to science fiction. To its coming of age they contributed as substantially as did a good many of the old timers, with their somewhat wider background in the field. Conspicuous in that vanguard were Robert Sheckley, Evan Hunter and Philip Dick. In this, Mr. Dick's newest novelette, there's a chess game kind of suspense, and a glimpse of tomorrow astoundingly prophetic.

as if he were measuring it for size. Couldn't he wait a couple of days—a decent interval?

"No trouble," Witwer answered blithely, his hands in his pockets. Eagerly, he examined the voluminous files that lined the wall. "I'm not coming into your agency blind, you understand. I have quite a few ideas of my own about the way Precrime is run."

Shakily, Anderton lit his pipe. "How is it run? I should like to know."

"Not badly," Witwer said. "In fact, quite well."

Anderton regarded him steadily. "Is that your private opinion? Or is it just cant?"

Witwer met his gaze guilelessly. "Private and public. The Senate's pleased with your work. In fact, they're enthusiastic." He added, "As enthusiastic as very old men can be."

Anderton winced, but outwardly he remained impassive. It cost him an effort, though. He wondered what Witwer *really* thought. What was actually going on in that close-cropped skull? The young man's eyes were blue, bright—and disturbingly clever. Witwer was nobody's fool. And obviously he had a great deal of ambition.

"As I understand it," Anderton said cautiously, "you're going to be my assistant until I retire."

"That's my understanding, too," the other replied, without an instant's hesitation.

"Which may be this year, or

next year—or ten years from now." The pipe in Anderton's hand trembled. "I'm under no compulsion to retire. I founded Precrime and I can stay on here as long as I want. It's purely *my* decision."

Witwer nodded, his expression still guileless. "Of course."

With an effort, Anderton cooled down a trifle. "I merely wanted to get things straight."

"From the start," Witwer agreed. "You're the boss. What you say goes." With every evidence of sincerity, he asked: "Would you care to show me the organization? I'd like to familiarize myself with the general routine as soon as possible."

As they walked along the busy, yellow-lit tiers of offices, Anderton said: "You're acquainted with the theory of precrime, of course. I presume we can take that for granted."

"I have the information publicly available," Witwer replied. "With the aid of your precog mutants, you've boldly and successfully abolished the post-crime punitive system of jails and fines. As we all realize, punishment was never much of a deterrent, and could scarcely have afforded comfort to a victim already dead."

They had come to the descent lift. As it carried them swiftly downward, Anderton said: "You've probably grasped the basic legalistic drawback to precrime methodology. We're taking in individuals who have broken no law."

"But they surely will," Witwer affirmed with conviction.

"Happily they *don't*—because we get them first, before they can commit an act of violence. So the commission of the crime itself is absolute metaphysics. We claim they're culpable. They, on the other hand, eternally claim they're innocent. And, in a sense, they *are* innocent."

The lift let them out, and they again paced down a yellow corridor. "In our society we have no major crimes," Anderton went on, "but we do have a detention camp full of would-be criminals."

Doors opened and closed, and they were in the analytical wing. Ahead of them rose impressive banks of equipment—the data-receptors, and the computing mechanisms that studied and restructured the incoming material. And beyond the machinery sat the three precogs, almost lost to view in the maze of wiring.

"There they are," Anderton said drily. "What do you think of them?"

In the gloomy half-darkness the three idiots sat babbling. Every incoherent utterance, every random syllable, was scrupulously recorded by data-collectors. The material was analyzed, compared, reassembled in the form of visual symbols, transcribed on conventional punch-cards, and ejected into various coded slots. All day long the idiots babbled, imprisoned in their special high-backed chairs, held in one rigid position by metal bands,

and bundles of wiring, clamps. Their physical needs were taken care of automatically. They had no spiritual needs. Vegetable-like, they muttered and dozed and existed. Their minds were dull, confused, lost in shadows.

But not the shadows of today. The three gibbering, fumbling creatures, with their enlarged heads and wasted bodies, were contemplating the future. The analytical machinery was recording prophecies, and as the three precog idiots talked, the machinery carefully listened.

For the first time Witwer's face lost its breezy confidence. A sick, dismayed expression crept into his eyes, a mixture of shame and moral shock. "It's not—pleasant," he murmured. "I didn't realize they were so—" He groped in his mind for the right word, gesticulating. "So—deformed."

"Deformed and retarded," Anderton instantly agreed. "Especially the girl, there. Donna is forty-five years old. But she looks about ten. The talent absorbs everything; the esp-lobe shrivels the balance of the frontal area. But what do we care? We get their prophecies. They pass on what we need. They don't understand any of it, but *we* do."

Subdued, Witwer crossed the room to the machinery. From a slot he collected a stack of cards. "Are these names that have come up?" he asked.

"Obviously." Frowning, Anderton took the stack from him. "I

haven't had a chance to examine them," he explained, impatiently concealing his annoyance.

Fascinated, Witwer watched the machinery pop a fresh card into the now empty slot. It was followed by a second—and a third. From the whirring disks came one card after another. "The precogs must see quite far into the future," Witwer exclaimed.

"They see a quite limited span," Anderton informed him. "A week or two ahead at the very most. Much of their data is worthless to us—simply not relevant to our line. We pass it on to the appropriate agencies. And they in turn trade data with us. Every important bureau has its cellar of treasured *monkeys*."

"Monkeys?" Witwer stared at him uneasily. "Oh, yes, I understand. See no evil, speak no evil, et cetera. Very amusing."

"Very *apt*." Automatically, Anderton collected the fresh cards which had been turned up by the spinning machinery. "Some of these names will be totally discarded. And most of the remainder record petty crimes: thefts, income tax evasion, assault, extortion. As I'm sure you know, Precrime has cut down felonies by ninety-nine and decimal point eight percent. We seldom get actual murder or treason. After all, the culprit knows we'll confine him in the detention camp a week before he gets a chance to commit the crime."

"When was the last time an ac-

tual murder was committed?" Witwer asked.

"Five years ago," Anderton said, pride in his voice.

"How did it happen?"

"The criminal escaped our teams. We had his name—in fact, we had all the details of the crime, including the victim's name. We knew the exact moment, and location of the planned act of violence. But in spite of us he was able to carry it out." Anderton shrugged. "After all, we can't get all of them." He riffled the cards. "But we do get most."

"One murder in five years." Witwer's confidence was returning. "Quite an impressive record . . . something to be proud of."

Quietly Anderton said: "I *am* proud. Thirty years ago I worked out the theory—back in the days when the self-seekers were thinking in terms of quick raids on the stock market. I saw something legitimate ahead—something of tremendous social value."

He tossed the packet of cards to Wally Page, his subordinate in charge of the monkey block. "See which ones we want," he told him. "Use your own judgment."

As Page disappeared with the cards, Witwer said thoughtfully: "It's a big responsibility."

"Yes, it is," agreed Anderton. "If we let one criminal escape—as we did five years ago—we've got a human life on our conscience. We're solely responsible. If we

slip up, somebody dies." Bitterly, he jerked three new cards from the slot. "It's a public trust."

"Are you ever tempted to—" Witwer hesitated. "I mean, some of the men you pick up must offer you plenty."

"It wouldn't do any good. A duplicate file of cards pops out at Army GHQ. It's check and balance. They can keep their eye on us as continuously as they wish." Anderton glanced briefly at the top card. "So even if we wanted to accept a—"

He broke off, his lips tightening. "What's the matter?" Witwer asked curiously.

Carefully, Anderton folded up the top card and put it away in his pocket. "Nothing," he muttered. "Nothing at all."

The harshness in his voice brought a flush to Witwer's face. "You really don't like me," he observed.

"True," Anderton admitted. "I don't. But—"

He couldn't believe he disliked the young man that much. It didn't seem possible; it *wasn't* possible. Something was wrong. Dazed, he tried to steady his tumbling mind.

On the card was his name. Line one—an already accused future murderer! According to the coded punches, Precrime Commissioner John A. Anderton was going to kill a man—and within the next week.

With absolute, overwhelming conviction, he didn't believe it.

II

IN THE outer office, talking to Page, stood Anderton's slim and attractive young wife, Lisa. She was engaged in a sharp, animated discussion of policy, and barely glanced up as Witwer and her husband entered.

"Hello, darling," Anderton said.

Witwer remained silent. But his pale eyes flickered slightly as they rested on the brown-haired woman in her trim police uniform. Lisa was now an executive official of Precrime but once, Witwer knew, she had been Anderton's secretary.

Noticing the interest on Witwer's face, Anderton paused and reflected. To plant the card in the machines would require an accomplice on the inside—someone who was closely connected with Precrime and had access to the analytical equipment. Lisa was an improbable element. But the possibility did exist.

Of course, the conspiracy could be large-scale and elaborate, involving far more than a "rigged" card inserted somewhere along the line. The original data itself might have been tampered with. Actually, there was no telling how far back the alteration went. A cold fear touched him as he began to see the possibilities. His original impulse—to tear open the machines and remove all the data—was uselessly primitive. Probably the tapes agreed with the card: he would only incriminate himself further.

He had approximately twenty-four hours. Then, the Army people would check over their cards and discover the discrepancy. They would find in their files a duplicate of the card he had appropriated. He had only one of two copies, which meant that the folded card in his pocket might just as well be lying on Page's desk in plain view of everyone.

From outside the building came the drone of police cars starting out on their routine round-ups. How many hours would elapse before one of them pulled up in front of *his* house?

"What's the matter, darling?" Lisa asked him uneasily. "You look as if you'd just seen a ghost. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he assured her.

Lisa suddenly seemed to become aware of Ed Witwer's admiring scrutiny. "Is this gentleman your new co-worker, darling?" she asked.

Warily, Anderton introduced his new associate. Lisa smiled in friendly greeting. Did a covert awareness pass between them? He couldn't tell. God, he was beginning to suspect everybody—not only his wife and Witwer, but a dozen members of his staff.

"Are you from New York?" Lisa asked.

"No," Witwer replied. "I've lived most of my life in Chicago. I'm staying at a hotel—one of the big downtown hotels. Wait—I have the name written on a card somewhere."

While he self-consciously searched his pockets, Lisa suggested: "Perhaps you'd like to have dinner with us. We'll be working in close cooperation, and I really think we ought to get better acquainted."

Startled, Anderton backed off. What were the chances of his wife's friendliness being benign, accidental? Witwer would be present the balance of the evening; and would now have an excuse to trail along to Anderton's private residence. Profoundly disturbed, he turned impulsively, and moved toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Lisa asked, astonished.

"Back to the monkey block," he told her. "I want to check over some rather puzzling data tapes before the Army sees them." He was out in the corridor before she could think of a plausible reason for detaining him.

Rapidly, he made his way to the ramp at its far end. He was striding down the outside stairs toward the public sidewalk, when Lisa appeared breathlessly behind him.

"What on earth has come over you?" Catching hold of his arm, she moved quickly in front of him. "I *knew* you were leaving," she exclaimed, blocking his way. "What's wrong with you? Everybody thinks you're—" She checked herself. "I mean, you're acting so erratically."

People surged by them—the usual afternoon crowd. Ignoring them, Anderton pried his wife's fingers from his arm. "I'm getting

out," he told her. "While there's still time."

"But—*why?*"

"I'm being framed—deliberately and maliciously. This creature is out to get my job. The Senate is getting at me *through* him."

Lisa gazed up at him, bewildered. "But he seems like such a nice young man."

"Nice as a water moccasin."

Lisa's dismay turned to disbelief. "I don't believe it. Darling, all this strain you've been under—" Smiling uncertainly, she faltered: "It's not really credible that Ed Witwer is trying to frame you. How could he, even if he wanted to? Surely Ed wouldn't—"

"Ed?"

"That's his name, isn't it?"

Her brown eyes flashed in startled, wildly incredulous protest. "Good heavens, you're suspicious of everybody. You actually believe I'm mixed up with it in some way, don't you?"

He considered. "I'm not sure."

She drew closer to him, her eyes accusing. "That's not true. You really believe it. Maybe you *ought* to go away for a few weeks. You desperately need a rest. All this tension and trauma, a younger man coming in. You're acting paranoiac. Can't you see that? People plotting against you. Tell me, do you have any actual proof?"

Anderton removed his wallet and took out the folded card. "Examine this carefully," he said, handing it to her.

The color drained out of her face, and she gave a little harsh, dry gasp.

"The set-up is fairly obvious," Anderton told her, as levelly as he could. "This will give Witwer a legal pretext to remove me right now. He won't have to wait until I resign." Grimly, he added: "They know I'm good for a few years yet."

"But—"

"It will end the check and balance system. Precrime will no longer be an independent agency. The Senate will control the police, and after that—" His lips tightened. "They'll absorb the Army too. Well, it's outwardly logical enough. *Of course* I feel hostility and resentment toward Witwer—*of course* I have a motive.

"Nobody likes to be replaced by a younger man, and find himself turned out to pasture. It's all really quite plausible—except that I haven't the remotest intention of killing Witwer. But I can't prove that. So what can I do?"

Mutely, her face very white, Lisa shook her head. "I—I don't know. Darling, if only—"

"Right now," Anderton said abruptly, "I'm going home and pack my things. That's about as far ahead as I can plan."

"You're really going to—to try to hide out?"

"I am. As far as the Centaurian-colony planets, if necessary. It's been done successfully before, and I have a twenty-four-hour start."

He turned resolutely. "Go back inside. There's no point in your coming with me."

"Did you imagine I would?" Lisa asked huskily.

Startled, Anderton stared at her. "Wouldn't you?" Then with stunned amazement, he murmured: "No, I can see you don't believe me. You still think I'm imagining all this." He jabbed savagely at the card. "Even with that evidence you still aren't convinced."

"No," Lisa agreed quickly, "I'm not. You didn't look at it closely enough, darling. Ed Witwer's name isn't on it."

Incredulous, Anderton took the card from her.

"Nobody says you're going to kill Ed Witwer," Lisa continued rapidly, in a thin, brittle voice. "The card *must* be genuine, understand? And it has nothing to do with Ed. He's not plotting against you and neither is anybody else."

Too confused to reply, Anderton stood studying the card. She was right. Ed Witwer was not listed as his victim. On line five, the machine had neatly stamped another name.

LEOPOLD KAPLAN

Numbly, he pocketed the card. He had never heard of the man in his life.

III

THE HOUSE was cool and deserted, and almost immediately Anderton began making prepara-

tions for his journey. While he packed, frantic thoughts passed through his mind.

Possibly he was wrong about Witwer—but how could he be sure? At any event, the conspiracy against him was far more complex than he had realized. Witwer, in the over-all picture, might be merely an insignificant puppet animated by someone else—by some distant, indistinct figure only vaguely visible in the background.

It had been a mistake to show the card to Lisa. Undoubtedly, she would describe it in detail to Witwer. He'd never get off Earth, never have an opportunity to find out what life on a frontier planet might be like.

While he was thus preoccupied, a board creaked behind him. He turned from the bed, clutching a weather-stained winter sports jacket, to face the muzzle of a gray-blue A-pistol.

"It didn't take you long," he said, staring with bitterness at the tight-lipped, heavyset man in a brown overcoat who stood holding the gun in his gloved hand. "Didn't she even hesitate?"

The intruder's face registered no response. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Come along with me."

Startled, Anderton laid down the sports jacket. "You're not from my agency. You're not a police officer?"

Protesting and astonished, he was hustled outside the house to a

waiting limousine. Instantly three heavily armed men closed in behind him. The door slammed and the car shot off down the highway, away from the city. Impassive and remote, the faces around him jogged with the motion of the speeding vehicle as open fields, dark and somber, swept past.

Anderton was still trying futilely to grasp the implications of what had happened, when the car came to a rutted side road, turned off, and descended into a gloomy sub-surface garage. Someone shouted an order. The heavy metal lock grated shut and overhead lights blinked on. The driver turned off the car motor.

"You'll have reason to regret this," Anderton warned hoarsely, as they dragged him from the car. "Do you realize who I am?"

"We realize," the man in the brown overcoat said.

At gun-point, Anderton was marched upstairs, from the clammy silence of the garage into a deep-carpeted hallway. He was, apparently, in a luxurious private residence, set out in the war-devoured rural area. At the far end of the hallway he could make out a room—a book-lined study simply but tastefully furnished. In a circle of lamplight, his face partly in shadows, a man he had never met sat waiting for him.

As Anderton approached, the man nervously slipped a pair of rimless glasses in place, snapped the case shut, and moistened his

dry lips. He was elderly, perhaps seventy or older and under his arm was a slim silver cane. His body was thin, wiry, his attitude curiously rigid. What little hair he had was dusty brown—a carefully-smoothed sheen of neutral color above his pale, bony skull. Only his eyes seemed really alert.

"Is this Anderton?" he inquired querulously, turning to the man in the brown overcoat. "Where did you pick him up?"

"At his home," the other replied. "He was packing—as we expected."

The man at the desk shivered visibly. "Packing." He took off his glasses and jerkily returned them to their case. "Look here," he said bluntly to Anderton, "what's the matter with you? Are you hopelessly insane? How could you kill a man you've never met?"

The old man, Anderton suddenly realized, was Leopold Kaplan.

"First, I'll ask you a question," Anderton countered rapidly. "Do you realize what you've done? I'm Commissioner of Police. I can have you sent up for twenty years."

He was going to say more, but a sudden wonder cut him short.

"How did you find out?" he demanded. Involuntarily, his hand went to his pocket, where the folded card was hidden. "It won't be for another—"

"I wasn't notified through your agency," Kaplan broke in, with angry impatience. "The fact that you've never heard of me doesn't

surprise me too much. Leopold Kaplan, General of the Army of the Federated Westblock Alliance." Begrudgingly, he added: "Retired, since the end of the Anglo-Chinese War, and the abolishment of AFWA."

It made sense. Anderton had suspected that the Army processed its duplicate cards immediately, for its own protection. Relaxing somewhat, he demanded: "Well? You've got me here. What next?"

"Evidently," Kaplan said, "I'm not going to have you destroyed, or it would have shown up on one of those miserable little cards. I'm curious about you. It seemed incredible to me that a man of your stature could contemplate the cold-blooded murder of a total stranger. There must be something more here. Frankly, I'm puzzled. If it represented some kind of Police strategy—" He shrugged his thin shoulders. "Surely you wouldn't have permitted the duplicate card to reach us."

"Unless," one of his men suggested, "it's a deliberate plant."

Kaplan raised his bright, bird-like eyes and scrutinized Anderton. "What do you have to say?"

"That's exactly what it is," Anderton said, quick to see the advantage of stating frankly what he believed to be the simple truth. "The prediction on the card was deliberately fabricated by a clique inside the police agency. The card is prepared and I'm netted. I'm relieved of my authority automat-

ically. My assistant steps in and claims he prevented the murder in the usual efficient Precrime manner. Needless to say, there is no murder or intent to murder."

"I agree with you that there will be no murder," Kaplan affirmed grimly. "You'll be in police custody. I intend to make certain of that."

Horried, Anderton protested: "You're taking me back there? If I'm in custody I'll never be able to prove—"

"I don't care what you prove or don't prove," Kaplan interrupted. "All I'm interested in is having you out of the way." Frigidly, he added: "For my own protection."

"He was getting ready to leave," one of the men asserted.

"That's right," Anderton said, sweating. "As soon as they get hold of me I'll be confined in the detention camp. Witwer will take over—lock, stock and barrel." His face darkened. "And my wife. They're acting in concert, apparently."

For a moment Kaplan seemed to waver. "It's possible," he conceded, regarding Anderton steadily. Then he shook his head. "I can't take the chance. If this is a frame against you, I'm sorry. But it's simply not my affair." He smiled slightly. "However, I wish you luck." To the men he said: "Take him to the police building and turn him over to the highest authority. He mentioned the name of the act-

ing commissioner, and waited for Anderton's reaction.

"Witwer!" Anderton echoed, incredulous.

Still smiling slightly, Kaplan turned and clicked on the console radio in the study. "Witwer has already assumed authority. Obviously, he's going to create quite an affair out of this."

There was a brief static hum, and then, abruptly, the radio blared out into the room—a noisy professional voice, reading a prepared announcement.

". . . all citizens are warned not to shelter or in any fashion aid or assist this dangerous marginal individual. The extraordinary circumstance of an escaped criminal at liberty and in a position to commit an act of violence is unique in modern times. All citizens are hereby notified that legal statutes still in force implicate any and all persons failing to cooperate fully with the police in their task of apprehending John Allison Anderton. To repeat: the Precrime Agency of the Federal Westbloc Government is in the process of locating and neutralizing its former Commissioner, John Allison Anderton, who, through the methodology of the precrime-system, is hereby declared a potential murderer and as such forfeits his right to freedom and all its privileges."

"It didn't take him long," Anderton muttered, appalled. Kaplan snapped off the radio and the voice vanished.

"Lisa must have gone directly to him," Anderton speculated bitterly.

"Why should he wait?" Kaplan asked. "You made your intentions clear."

He nodded to his men. "Take him back to town. I feel uneasy having him so close. In that respect I concur with Commissioner Witwer. I want him neutralized as soon as possible."

IV

COLD, light rain beat against the pavement, as the car moved through the dark streets of New York City toward the police building.

"You can see his point," one of the men said to Anderton. "If you were in his place you'd act just as decisively."

Sullen and resentful, Anderton stared straight ahead.

"Anyhow," the man went on, "you're just one of many. Thousands of people have gone to that detention camp. You won't be lonely. As a matter of fact, you may not want to leave."

Helplessly, Anderton watched pedestrians hurrying along the rain-swept sidewalks. He felt no strong emotion. He was aware only of an overpowering fatigue. Dully, he checked off the street numbers; they were getting near the police station.

"This Witwer seems to know how to take advantage of an opportunity," one of the men observed

conversationally. "Did you ever meet him?"

"Briefly," Anderton answered.

"He wanted your job—so he framed you. Are you sure of that?"

Anderton grimaced. "Does it matter?"

"I was just curious." The man eyed him languidly. "So you're the ex-Commissioner of Police. People in the camp will be glad to see you coming. They'll remember you."

"No doubt," Anderton agreed.

"Witwer sure didn't waste any time. Kaplan's lucky—with an official like that in charge." The man looked at Anderton almost pleadingly. "You're really convinced it's a plot, eh?"

"Of course."

"You wouldn't harm a hair of Kaplan's head? For the first time in history, Precrime goes wrong? An innocent man is framed by one of those cards. Maybe there've been other innocent people—right?"

"It's quite possible," Anderton admitted listlessly.

"Maybe the whole system can break down. Sure, you're not going to commit a murder—and maybe none of them were. Is that why you told Kaplan you wanted to keep yourself outside? Were you hoping to prove the system wrong? I've got an open mind, if you want to talk about it."

Another man leaned over, and asked, "Just between the two of us, is there really anything to this

plot stuff? Are you really being framed?"

Anderton sighed. At that point he wasn't certain, himself. Perhaps he was trapped in a closed, meaningless time-circle with no motive and no beginning. In fact, he was almost ready to concede that he was the victim of a weary, neurotic fantasy, spawned by growing insecurity. Without a fight, he was willing to give himself up. A vast weight of exhaustion lay upon him. He was struggling against the impossible—and all the cards were stacked against him.

The sharp squeal of tires roused him. Frantically, the driver struggled to control the car, tugging at the wheel and slamming on the brakes, as a massive bread truck loomed up from the fog and rain directly across the lane ahead. Had he gunned the motor instead he might have saved himself. But too late he realized his error. The car skidded, lurched, hesitated for a brief instant, and then smashed head on into the bread truck.

Under Anderton the seat lifted up and flung him face-forward against the door. Pain, sudden, intolerable, seemed to burst in his brain as he lay gasping and trying feebly to pull himself to his knees. Somewhere the crackle of fire echoed dismally, a patch of hissing brilliance winking in the swirls of mist making their way into the twisted hulk of the car.

Hands from outside the car reached for him. Slowly he became

aware that he was being dragged through the rent that had been the door. A heavy seat cushion was shoved busily aside, and all at once he found himself on his feet, leaning heavily against a dark shape and being guided into the shadows of an alley a short distance from the car.

In the distance, police sirens wailed.

"You'll live," a voice grated in his ear, low and urgent. It was a voice he had never heard before, as unfamiliar and harsh as the rain beating into his face. "Can you hear what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Anderton acknowledged. He plucked aimlessly at the ripped sleeve of his shirt. A cut on his cheek was beginning to throb. Confused, he tried to orient himself. "You're not—"

"Stop talking and listen." The man was heavyset, almost fat. Now his big hands held Anderton propped against the wet brick wall of the building, out of the rain and the flickering light of the burning car. "We had to do it that way," he said. "It was the only alternative. We didn't have much time. We thought Kaplan would keep you at his place longer."

"Who are you?" Anderton managed.

The moist, rain-streaked face twisted into a humorless grin. "My name's Fleming. You'll see me again. We have about five seconds before the police get here. Then we're back where we started." A

flat packet was stuffed into Anderton's hands. "That's enough loot to keep you going. And there's a full set of identification, in there. We'll contact you from time to time." His grin increased and became a nervous chuckle. "Until you've proved your point."

Anderton blinked. "It is a frame-up, then?"

"Of course." Sharply, the man swore. "You mean they've got you to believe it, too?"

"I thought—" Anderton had trouble talking; one of his front teeth seemed to be loose. "Hostility toward Witwer . . . replaced, my wife and a younger man, natural resentment . . ."

"Don't kid yourself," the other said. "You know better than that. This whole business was worked out carefully. They had every phase of it under control. The card was set to pop the day Witwer appeared. They've already got the first part wrapped up. Witwer is Commissioner, and you're a hunted criminal."

"Who's behind it?"

"Your wife."

Anderton's head spun. "You're positive?"

The man laughed. "You bet your life." He glanced quickly around. "Here come your police. Take off down this alley. Grab a bus, get yourself into the slum section, rent a room and buy a stack of magazines to keep you busy. Get other clothes— You're smart enough to take care of yourself.

Don't try to leave Earth. They've got all the intersystem transports screened. If you can keep low for the next seven days, you're made."

"Who are you?" Anderton demanded.

Fleming let go of him. Cautiously, he moved to the entrance of the alley and peered out. The first police car had come to rest on the damp pavement, its motor spinning tinnily, it crept suspiciously toward the smoldering ruin that had been Kaplan's car. Inside the wreck the squad of men were stirring feebly, beginning to creep painfully through the tangle of steel and plastic out into the cold rain.

"Consider us a protective society." Fleming said softly, his plump, expressionless face shining with moisture. "A sort of police force that watches the police. To see," he added, "that everything stays on an even keel."

His thick hand shot out. Stumbling, Anderton was knocked away from him, half-falling into the shadows and damp debris that littered the alley.

"Get going," Fleming told him sharply. "And don't discard that packet." As Anderton felt his way hesitantly toward the far exit of the alley, the man's last words drifted to him. "Study it carefully and you may still survive."

V

THE IDENTIFICATION cards described him as Ernest Temple, an

unemployed electrician, drawing a weekly subsistence from the State of New York, with a wife and four children in Buffalo and less than a hundred dollars in assets. A sweat-stained green card gave him permission to travel and to maintain no fixed address. A man looking for work needed to travel. He might have to go a long way.

As he rode across town in the almost empty bus, Anderton studied the description of Ernest Temple. Obviously, the cards had been made out with him in mind, for all the measurements fitted. After a time he wondered about the fingerprints and the brain-wave pattern. They couldn't possibly stand comparison. The walletful of cards would get him past only the most cursory examination.

But it was something. And with the ID cards came over ten thousand dollars in bills. He pocketed the money and cards, then turned to the neatly-typed message in which they had been enclosed.

At first he could make no sense out of it. For a long time he studied it, perplexed:

The existence of a majority logically implies a corresponding minority.

The bus had entered the vast slum region, the tumbled miles of cheap hotels and broken-down tenements that had sprung up after the mass destruction of the war. It slowed to a stop, and Anderton got

to his feet. A few passengers idly observed his cut cheek and damaged clothing. Ignoring them, he stepped down onto the rain-swept curb.

Beyond collecting the money due him, the hotel clerk was not interested. Anderton climbed the stairs to the second floor and entered the narrow, musty-smelling room that now belonged to him. Gratefully, he locked the door and pulled down the window shades. The room was small but clean. Bed, dresser, scenic calendar, chair, lamp, a radio with a slot for the insertion of quarters.

He dropped a quarter into it and threw himself heavily down on the bed. All main stations carried the police bulletin. It was novel, exciting, something unknown to the present generation. An escaped criminal! The public was avidly interested.

"... this man has used the advantage of his high position to carry out an initial escape," the announcer was saying, with professional indignation. "Because of his high office he had access to the previewed data and the trust placed in him permitted him to evade the normal process of detection and re-location. During the period of his tenure he exercised his authority to send countless potentially guilty individuals to their proper confinement, thus sparing the lives of innocent victims. This man, John Allison Anderton, was instrumental in the original creation of

the Precrime system, the prophylactic pre-detection of criminals through the ingenious use of mutant precogs, capable of previewing future events and transferring orally that data to analytical machinery. These three precogs, in their vital function . . ."

The voice faded out, as he left the room and entered the tiny bathroom. There, he stripped off his coat, and shirt, and ran hot water in the wash bowl. He began bathing the cut on his cheek. At the drugstore on the corner he had bought iodine and Band-aids, a razor, comb, toothbrush, and other small things he would need. The next morning he intended to find a second-hand clothing store and buy more suitable clothing. After all, he was now an unemployed electrician, not an accident-damaged Commissioner of Police.

In the other room the radio blared on. Only subconsciously aware of it, he stood in front of the cracked mirror, examining a broken tooth.

"... the system of three precogs finds its genesis in the computers of the middle decades of this century. How are the results of an electronic computer checked? By feeding the data to a second computer of identical design. But two computers are not sufficient. If each computer arrives at a different answer it is impossible to tell *a priori* which is correct. The solution, based on a careful study of statistical method, is to utilize a

third computer to check the results of the first two. In this manner, a so-called majority report is obtained. It can be assumed with fair probability that the agreement of two out of three computers indicates which of the alternative results is accurate. It would not be likely that two computers would arrive at identically incorrect solutions—"

Anderton dropped the towel he was clutching and raced into the other room. Trembling, he bent to catch the blaring words of the radio.

"... unanimity of all three precogs is a hoped-for but seldom-achieved phenomenon, acting-Commissioner Witwer explains. It is much more common to obtain a collaborative majority report of two precogs, plus a minority report of some slight variation, usually with reference to time and place, from the third mutant. This is explained by the theory of *multiple-futures*. If only one time-path existed, precognitive information would be of no importance, since no possibility would exist, in possessing this information, of altering the future. In the Precrime Agency's work we must first of all assume—"

Frantically, Anderton paced around the tiny room. Majority report—only two of the precogs had concurred on the material underlying the card. That was the meaning of the message enclosed with the packet. The report of the third

precog, the minority report, was somehow of importance.

Why?

His watch told him that it was after midnight. Page would be off duty. He wouldn't be back in the monkey block until the next afternoon. It was a slim chance, but worth taking. Maybe Page would cover for him, and maybe not. He would have to risk it.

He had to see the minority report.

VI

BETWEEN noon and one o'clock the rubbish-littered streets swarmed with people. He chose that time, the busiest part of the day, to make his call. Selecting a phonebooth in a patron-teeming super drugstore, he dialed the familiar police number and stood holding the cold receiver to his ear. Deliberately, he had selected the aud, not the vid line: in spite of his second-hand clothing and seedy, unshaven appearance, he might be recognized.

The receptionist was new to him. Cautiously, he gave Page's extension. If Witwer was removing the regular staff and putting in his satellites, he might find himself talking to a total stranger.

"Hello," Page's gruff voice came.

Relieved, Anderton glanced around. Nobody was paying any attention to him. The shoppers wandered among the merchandise, going about their daily routines.

"Can you talk?" he asked. "Or are you tied up?"

There was a moment of silence. He could picture Page's mild face torn with uncertainty as he wildly tried to decide what to do. At last came halting words. "Why—are you calling here?"

Ignoring the question, Anderton said, "I didn't recognize the receptionist. New personnel?"

"Brand-new," Page agreed, in a thin, strangled voice. "Big turnover, these days."

"So I hear." Tensely, Anderton asked, "How's your job? Still safe?"

"Wait a minute." The receiver was put down and the muffled sound of steps came in Anderton's ear. It was followed by the quick slam of a door being hastily shut. Page returned. "We can talk better now," he said hoarsely.

"How much better?"

"Not a great deal. Where are you?"

"Strolling through Central Park," Anderton said. "Enjoying the sunlight." For all he knew, Page had gone to make sure the line-tap was in place. Right now, an airborne police team was probably on its way. But he had to take the chance. "I'm in a new field," he said curtly. "I'm an electrician these days."

"Oh?" Page said, baffled.

"I thought maybe you had some work for me. If it can be arranged, I'd like to drop by and examine your basic computing equipment.

Especially the data and analytical banks in the monkey block."

After a pause, Page said: "It—might be arranged. If it's really important."

"It is," Anderton assured him. "When would be best for you?"

"Well," Page said, struggling. "I'm having a repair team come in to look at the intercom equipment. The acting-Commissioner wants it improved, so he can operate quicker. You might trail along."

"I'll do that. About when?"

"Say four o'clock. Entrance B, level 6. I'll—meet you."

"Fine," Anderton agreed, already starting to hang up. "I hope you're still in charge, when I get there."

He hung up and rapidly left the booth. A moment later he was pushing through the dense pack of people crammed into the nearby cafeteria. Nobody would locate him there.

He had three and a half hours to wait. And it was going to seem a lot longer. It proved to be the longest wait of his life before he finally met Page as arranged.

The first thing Page said was: "You're out of your mind. Why in hell did you come back?"

"I'm not back for long." Tautly, Anderton prowled around the monkey block, systematically locking one door after another. "Don't let anybody in. I can't take chances."

"You should have quit when you

were ahead." In an agony of apprehension, Page followed after him. "Witwer is making hay, hand over fist. He's got the whole country screaming for your blood."

Ignoring him, Anderton snapped open the main control bank of the analytical machinery. "Which of the three monkeys gave the minority report?"

"Don't question me— I'm getting out." On his way to the door Page halted briefly, pointed to the middle figure, and then disappeared. The door closed; Anderton was alone.

The middle one. He knew that one well. The dwarfed, hunched-over figure had sat buried in its wiring and relays for fifteen years. As Anderton approached, it didn't look up. With eyes glazed and blank, it contemplated a world that did not yet exist, blind to the physical reality that lay around it.

"Jerry" was twenty-four years old. Originally, he had been classified as a hydrocephalic idiot but when he reached the age of six the psych testers had identified the precog talent, buried under the layers of tissue corrosion. Placed in the government-operated training school, the latent talent had been cultivated. By the time he was nine the talent had advanced to a useful stage. "Jerry," however, remained in the aimless chaos of idiocy; the burgeoning faculty had absorbed the totality of his personality.

Squatting down, Anderton began disassembling the protective shields

that guarded the tape-reels stored in the analytical machinery. Using schematics, he traced the leads back from the final stages of the integrated computers, to the point where "Jerry's" individual equipment branched off. Within minutes he was shakily lifting out two half-hour tapes: recent rejected data not fused with majority reports. Consulting the code chart, he selected the section of tape which referred to his particular card.

A tape scanner was mounted nearby. Holding his breath, he inserted the tape, activated the transport, and listened. It took only a second. From the first statement of the report it was clear what had happened. He had what he wanted; he could stop looking.

"Jerry's" vision was misphased. Because of the erratic nature of precognition, he was examining a time-area slightly different from that of his companions. For him, the report that Anderton would commit a murder was an event to be integrated along with everything else. That assertion—and Anderton's reaction—was one more piece of datum.

Obviously, "Jerry's" report superseded the majority report. Having been informed that he would commit a murder, Anderton would change his mind and not do so. The preview of the murder had cancelled out the murder; prophylaxis had occurred simply in his being informed. Already, a

new time-path had been created. But "Jerry" was outvoted.

Trembling, Anderton rewound the tape and clicked on the recording head. At high speed he made a copy of the report, restored the original, and removed the duplicate from the transport. Here was the proof that the card was invalid: *obsolete*. All he had to do was show it to Witwer . . .

His own stupidity amazed him. Undoubtedly, Witwer had seen the report; and in spite of it, had assumed the job of Commissioner, had kept the police teams out. Witwer didn't intend to back down; he wasn't concerned with Anderton's innocence.

What, then, could he do? Who else would be interested?

"You damn fool!" a voice behind him grated, wild with anxiety.

Quickly, he turned. His wife stood at one of the doors, in her police uniform, her eyes frantic with dismay. "Don't worry," he told her briefly, displaying the reel of tape. "I'm leaving."

Her face distorted, Lisa rushed frantically up to him. "Page said you were here, but I couldn't believe it. He shouldn't have let you in. He just doesn't understand what you are."

"What am I?" Anderton inquired caustically. "Before you answer, maybe you better listen to this tape."

"I don't want to listen to it! I just want you to get out of here! Ed Witwer knows somebody's

down here. Page is trying to keep him occupied, but—" She broke off, her head turned stiffly to one side. "He's here now! He's going to force his way in."

"Haven't you got any influence? Be gracious and charming. He'll probably forget about me."

Lisa looked at him in bitter reproach. "There's a ship parked on the roof. If you want to get away . . ." Her voice choked and for an instant she was silent. Then she said, "I'll be taking off in a minute or so. If you want to come—"

"I'll come," Anderton said. He had no other choice. He had secured his tape, his proof, but he hadn't worked out any method of leaving. Gladly, he hurried after the slim figure of his wife as she strode from the block, through a side door and down a supply corridor, her heels clicking loudly in the deserted gloom.

"It's a good fast ship," she told him over her shoulder. "It's emergency-fueled—ready to go. I was going to supervise some of the teams."

VII

BEHIND the wheel of the high-velocity police cruiser, Anderton outlined what the minority tape contained. Lisa listened without comment, her face pinched and strained, her hands clasped tensely in her lap. Below the ship, the war-ravaged rural countryside

spread out like a relief map, the vacant regions between cities crater-pitted and dotted with the ruins of farms and small industrial plants.

"I wonder," she said, when he had finished, "how many times this has happened before."

"A minority report? A great many times."

"I mean, one precog misphased. Using the report of the others as data—superseding them." Her eyes dark and serious, she added, "Perhaps a lot of the people in the camps are like you."

"No," Anderton insisted. But he was beginning to feel uneasy about it, too. "I was in a position to see the card, to get a look at the report. That's what did it."

"But—" Lisa gestured significantly. "Perhaps all of them would have reacted that way. We could have told them the truth."

"It would have been too great a risk," he answered stubbornly.

Lisa laughed sharply. "Risk? Chance? Uncertainty? With precogs around?"

Anderton concentrated on steering the fast little ship. "This is a unique case," he repeated. "And we have an immediate problem. We can tackle the theoretical aspects later on. I have to get this tape to the proper people—before your bright young friend demolishes it."

"You're taking it to Kaplan?"

"I certainly am." He tapped the reel of tape which lay on the seat

between them. "He'll be interested. Proof that his life isn't in danger ought to be of vital concern to him."

From her purse, Lisa shakily got out her cigarette case. "And you think he'll help you."

"He may—or he may not. It's a chance worth taking."

"How did you manage to go underground so quickly?" Lisa asked. A completely effective disguise is difficult to obtain."

"All it takes is money," he answered evasively.

As she smoked, Lisa pondered. "Probably Kaplan will protect you," she said. "He's quite powerful."

"I thought he was only a retired general."

"Technically—that's what he is. But Witwer got out the dossier on him. Kaplan heads an unusual kind of exclusive veterans' organization. It's actually a kind of club, with a few restricted members. High officers only—an international class from both sides of the war. Here in New York they maintain a great mansion of a house, three glossy-paper publications, and occasional TV coverage that costs them a small fortune."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Only this. You've convinced me that you're innocent. I mean, it's obvious that you *won't* commit a murder. But you must realize now that the original report, the majority report, *was not a fake*. Nobody falsified it. Ed Witwer

didn't create it. There's no plot against you, and there never was. If you're going to accept this minority report as genuine you'll have to accept the majority one, also."

Reluctantly, he agreed. "I suppose so."

"Ed Witwer," Lisa continued, "is acting in complete good faith. He really believes you're a potential criminal—and why not? He's got the majority report sitting on his desk, but you have that card folded up in your pocket."

"I destroyed it," Anderton said, quietly.

Lisa leaned earnestly toward him. "Ed Witwer isn't motivated by any desire to get your job," she said. "He's motivated by the same desire that has always dominated you. He believes in Precrime. He wants the system to continue. I've talked to him and I'm convinced he's telling the truth."

Anderton asked, "Do you want me to take this reel to Witwer? If I do—he'll destroy it."

"Nonsense," Lisa retorted. "The originals have been in his hands from the start. He could have destroyed them any time he wished."

"That's true," Anderton conceded. "Quite possibly he didn't know."

"Of course, he didn't. Look at it this way. If Kaplan gets hold of that tape, the police will be discredited. Can't you see why? It would prove that the majority report was an error. Ed Witwer is

absolutely right. You have to be taken in—if Precrime is to survive. You're thinking of your own safety. But think, for a moment, about the system." Leaning over, she stubbed out her cigarette and fumbled in her purse for another. "Which means more to you—your own personal safety or the existence of the system?"

"My safety," Anderton answered, without hesitation.

"You're positive?"

"If the system can survive only by imprisoning innocent people, then it deserves to be destroyed. My personal safety is important because I'm a human being. And furthermore—"

From her purse, Lisa got out an incredibly tiny pistol. "I believe," she told him huskily, "that I have my finger on the firing release. I've never used a weapon like this before. But I'm willing to try."

After a pause, Anderton asked: "You want me to turn the ship around? Is that it?"

"Yes, back to the police building. I'm sorry. If you could put the good of the system above your own selfish—"

"Keep your sermon," Anderton told her. "I'll take the ship back. But I'm not going to listen to your defense of a code of behavior no intelligent man could subscribe to."

Lisa's lips pressed into a thin, bloodless line. Holding the pistol tightly, she sat facing him, her eyes fixed intently on him as he swung the ship in a broad arc. A

few loose articles rattled from the glove compartment as the little craft turned on a radical slant, one wing rising majestically until it pointed straight up.

Both Anderton and his wife were supported by the constraining metal arms of their seats. But not so the third member of the party.

Out of the corner of his eye, Anderton saw a flash of motion. A sound came simultaneously, the clawing struggle of a large man as he abruptly lost his footing and plunged into the reinforced wall of the ship. What followed happened quickly. Fleming scrambled instantly to his feet, lurching and wary, one arm lashing out for the woman's pistol. Anderton was too startled to cry out. Lisa turned, saw the man—and screamed. Fleming knocked the gun from her hand, sending it clattering to the floor.

Grunting, Fleming shoved her aside and retrieved the gun. "Sorry," he gasped, straightening up as best he could. "I thought she might talk more. That's why I waited."

"You were here when—" Anderton began—and stopped. It was obvious that Fleming and his men had kept him under surveillance. The existence of Lisa's ship had been duly noted and factored in, and while Lisa had debated whether it would be wise to fly him to safety, Fleming had crept into the storage compartment of the ship.

"Perhaps," Fleming said, "you'd

better give me that reel of tape." His moist, clumsy fingers groped for it. "You're right— Witwer would have melted it down to a puddle."

"Kaplan, too?" Anderton asked numbly, still dazed by the appearance of the man.

"Kaplan is working directly with Witwer. That's why his name showed on line five of the card. Which one of them is the actual boss, we can't tell. Possibly neither." Fleming tossed the tiny pistol away and got out his own heavy-duty military weapon. "You pulled a real flub in taking off with this woman. I told you she was back of the whole thing."

"I can't believe that," Anderton protested. "If she—"

"You've got no sense. This ship was warmed up by Witwer's order. They wanted to fly you out of the building so that we couldn't get to you. With you on your own, separated from us, you didn't stand a chance."

A strange look passed over Lisa's stricken features. "It's not true," she whispered. "Witwer never saw this ship. I was going out to supervise—"

"You almost got away with it," Fleming interrupted inexorably. "We'll be lucky if a police patrol ship isn't hanging on us. There wasn't time to check." He squatted down as he spoke, directly behind the woman's chair. "The first thing is to get this woman out of the way. We'll have to drag you com-

pletely out of this area. Page tipped off Witwer on your new disguise, and you can be sure it has been widely broadcast."

Still crouching, Fleming seized hold of Lisa. Tossing his heavy gun to Anderton, he expertly tilted her chin up until her temple was shoved back against the seat. Lisa clawed frantically at him; a thin, terrified wail rose in her throat. Ignoring her, Fleming closed his great hands around her neck and began relentlessly to squeeze.

"No bullet wound," he explained, gasping. "She's going to fall out—natural accident. It happens all the time. But in this case, her neck will be broken *first*."

It seemed strange that Anderton waited so long. As it was, Fleming's thick fingers were cruelly embedded in the woman's pale flesh before he lifted the butt of the heavy-duty pistol and brought it down on the back of Fleming's skull. The monstrous hands relaxed. Staggered, Fleming's head fell forward and he sagged against the wall of the ship. Trying feebly to collect himself, he began dragging his body upward. Anderton hit him again, this time above the left eye. He fell back, and lay still.

Struggling to breathe, Lisa remained for a moment huddled over, her body swaying back and forth. Then, gradually, the color crept back into her face.

"Can you take the controls?" Anderton asked, shaking her, his voice urgent.

"Yes, I think so." Almost mechanically she reached for the wheel. "I'll be all right. Don't worry about me."

"This pistol," Anderton said, "is Army ordinance issue. But it's not from the war. It's one of the useful new ones they've developed. I could be a long way off but there's just a chance—"

He climbed back to where Fleming lay spread out on the deck. Trying not to touch the man's head, he tore open his coat and rummaged in his pockets. A moment later Fleming's sweat-sodden wallet rested in his hands.

Tod Fleming, according to his identification, was an Army Major attached to the Internal Intelligence Department of Military Information. Among the various papers was a document signed by General Leopold Kaplan, stating that Fleming was under the special protection of his own group—the International Veterans' League.

Fleming and his men were operating under Kaplan's orders. The bread truck, the accident, had been deliberately rigged.

It meant that Kaplan had deliberately kept him out of police hands. The plan went back to the original contact in his home, when Kaplan's men had picked him up as he was packing. Incredible, he realized what had really happened. Even then, they were making sure they got him before the police. From the start, it had been an elab-

orate strategy to make certain that Witwer would fail to arrest him.

"You were telling the truth," Anderton said to his wife, as he climbed back in the seat. "Can we get hold of Witwer?"

Mutely, she nodded. Indicating the communications circuit of the dashboard, she asked: "What—did you find?"

"Get Witwer for me. I want to talk to him as soon as I can. It's very urgent."

Jerkily, she dialed, got the closed-channel mechanical circuit, and raised police headquarters in New York. A visual panorama of petty police officials flashed by before a tiny replica of Ed Witwer's features appeared on the screen.

"Remember me?" Anderton asked him.

Witwer blanched. "Good God. What happened? Lisa, are you bringing him in?" Abruptly his eyes fastened on the gun in Anderton's hands. "Look," he said savagely, "don't do anything to her. Whatever you may think, she's not responsible."

"I've already found that out," Anderton answered. "Can you get a fix on us? We may need protection getting back."

"Back!" Witwer gazed at him unbelievably. "You're coming in? You're giving yourself up?"

"I am, yes." Speaking rapidly, urgently, Anderton added, "There's something you must do immediately. Close off the monkey block. Make certain nobody gets in—

Page or anyone else. *Especially Army people.*"

"Kaplan," the miniature image said.

"What about him?"

"He was here. He—he just left."

Anderton's heart stopped beating. "What was he doing?"

"Picking up data. Transcribing duplicates of our precog reports on you. He insisted he wanted them solely for his protection."

"Then he's already got it," Anderton said. "It's too late."

Alarmed, Witwer almost shouted: "Just what do you mean? What's happening?"

"I'll tell you," Anderton said heavily, "when I get back to my office."

VIII

WITWER met him on the roof of the police building. As the small ship came to rest, a cloud of escort ships dipped their fins and sped off. Anderton immediately approached the blond-haired young man.

"You've got what you wanted," he told him. "You can lock me up, and send me to the detention camp. But that won't be enough."

Witwer's blue eyes were pale with uncertainty. "I'm afraid I don't understand—"

"It's my fault. I should never have left the police building. Where's Wally Page?"

"We've already clamped down

on him," Witwer replied. "He won't give us any trouble."

Anderton's face was grim.

"You're holding him for the wrong reason," he said. "Letting me into the monkey block was no crime. But passing information to Army is. You've had an Army plant working here." He corrected himself, a little lamely, "I mean, I have."

"I've called back the order on you. Now the teams are looking for Kaplan."

"Any luck?"

"He left here in an Army truck. We followed him, but the truck got into a militarized Barracks. Now they've got a big wartime R-3 tank blocking the street. It would be civil war to move it aside."

Slowly, hesitantly, Lisa made her way from the ship. She was still pale and shaken and on her throat an ugly bruise was forming.

"What happened to you?" Witwer demanded. Then he caught sight of Fleming's inert form lying spread out inside. Facing Anderton squarely, he said: "Then you've finally stopped pretending this is some conspiracy of mine."

"I have."

"You don't think I'm—" He made a disgusted face. "Plotting to get your job."

"Sure you are. Everybody is guilty of that sort of thing. And I'm plotting just as determinedly to keep it. But this is something else—and you're not responsible."

"Why do you assert," Witwer inquired, "that it's too late to turn yourself in? My God, we'll put you in the camp. The week will pass and Kaplan will still be alive."

"He'll be alive, yes," Anderton conceded. "But he can prove he'd be just as alive if I were walking the streets. He has the information that proves the majority report obsolete. He can break the Precrime system, either way." Baffled, furious, he finished: "Heads or tails, he wins—and we lose. The Army discredits us; their strategy paid off."

"But why are they risking so much? What exactly do they want?"

"After the Anglo-Chinese War, the Army lost out. It isn't what it was in the good old AFWA days. They ran the complete show, both military and domestic. And they did their own police work."

"Like Fleming," Lisa said faintly.

"After the war, the Westbloc was demilitarized. Officers like Kaplan were retired and discarded. Nobody likes that." Anderton grimaced. "I can sympathize with him. He's not the only one. But we couldn't keep on running things that way. We had to divide up the authority."

"You say Kaplan has won," Witwer said. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"I'm not going to kill him. We know it and he knows it. Probably he'll come around and offer us

some kind of a deal. We'll continue to function, but the Senate will abolish our real pull. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I should say not," Witwer answered emphatically. "One of these days I'm going to be running this agency." He flushed. "Not immediately, of course."

Anderton's expression was somber. "It's too bad you publicized the majority report. If you had kept it quiet, we could cautiously draw it back in. But everybody's heard about it. We can't retract it now."

"I guess not," Witwer admitted awkwardly. "Maybe I—don't have this job down as neatly as I imagined."

"You will, in time. You'll be a good police officer. You believe in the status quo. But learn to take it easy." Anderton moved away from them. "I'm going to go study the data tapes of the majority report. I want to find out exactly how I was supposed to kill Kaplan." Reflectively, he finished: "It might give me some ideas."

The data tapes of the precogs "Donna" and "Mike" were separately stored. Choosing the machinery responsible for the analysis of "Donna," he opened the protective shield and laid out the contents. As before, the code informed him which reels were relevant and in a moment he had the tape-trans-port mechanism in operation.

It was approximately what he had suspected. This was the mate-

rial utilized by "Jerry"—the superseded time-path. In it Kaplan's Military Intelligence agents kidnapped Anderton as he drove home from work. Taken to Kaplan's villa, the organizational GHQ of the International Veterans' League, Anderton was given an ultimatum: voluntarily disband the Precrime system or face open hostilities with Army.

In this discarded time-path, Anderton, as Police Commissioner, had turned to the Senate for support. No support was forthcoming. To avoid civil war, the Senate had ratified the dismemberment of the police system, and decreed a return to military law "to cope with the emergency." Taking a corps of fanatic police, Anderton had located Kaplan and shot him, along with other officials of the Veterans' League. Only Kaplan had died. The others had been patched up. And the coup had been successful.

This was "Donna." He rewound the tape and turned to the material previewed by "Mike." It would be identical; both precogs had combined to present a unified picture. "Mike" began as "Donna" had begun: Anderton had become aware of Kaplan's plot against the police. But something was wrong. Puzzled, he ran the tape back to the beginning. Incomprehensibly, it didn't jibe. Again he replayed the tape, listening intently.

The "Mike" report was quite different from the "Donna" report.

An hour later, he had finished his examination, put away the tapes, and left the monkey block. As soon as he emerged, Witwer asked: "What's the matter? I can see something's wrong."

"No," Anderton answered slowly, still deep in thought. "Not exactly wrong." A sound came to his ears. He walked vaguely over to the window and peered out.

The street was crammed with people. Moving down the center lane was a four-column line of uniformed troops. Rifles, helmets . . . marching soldiers in their dingy wartime uniforms, carrying the cherished pennants of AFWA flapping in the cold afternoon wind.

"An Army rally," Witwer explained bleakly. "I was wrong. They're not going to make a deal with us. Why should they? Kaplan's going to make it public."

Anderton felt no surprise. "He's going to read the minority report?"

"Apparently. They're going to demand the Senate disband us, and take away our authority. They're going to claim we've been arresting innocent men—nocturnal police raids, that sort of thing. Rule by terror."

"You suppose the Senate will yield?"

Witwer hesitated. "I wouldn't want to guess."

"I'll guess," Anderton said. "They will. That business out there fits with what I learned downstairs. We've got ourselves boxed in and there's only one direction

we can go. Whether we like it or not, we'll have to take it." His eyes had a steely glint.

Apprehensively, Witwer asked: "What is it?"

"Once I say it, you'll wonder why you didn't invent it. Very obviously, I'm going to have to fulfill the publicized report. I'm going to have to kill Kaplan. That's the only way we can keep them from discrediting us."

"But," Witwer said, astonished, "the majority report has been superseded."

"I can do it," Anderton informed him, "but it's going to cost. You're familiar with the statutes governing first-degree murder?"

"Life imprisonment."

"At least. Probably, you could pull a few wires and get it commuted to exile. I could be sent to one of the colony planets, the good old frontier."

"Would you—prefer that?"

"Hell, no," Anderton said heartily. "But it would be the lesser of the two evils. And it's got to be done."

"I don't see how you can kill Kaplan."

Anderton got out the heavy-duty military weapon Fleming had tossed to him. "I'll use this."

"They won't stop you?"

"Why should they? They've got that minority report that says I've changed my mind."

"Then the minority report is incorrect?"

"No," Anderton said, "it's ab-

solutely correct. But I'm going to murder Kaplan anyhow."

IX

HE HAD never killed a man. He had never even seen a man killed. And he had been Police Commissioner for thirty years. For this generation, deliberate murder had died out. It simply didn't happen.

A police car carried him to within a block of the Army rally. There, in the shadows of the back seat, he painstakingly examined the pistol Fleming had provided him. It seemed to be intact. Actually, there was no doubt of the outcome. He was absolutely certain of what would happen within the next half hour. Putting the pistol back together, he opened the door of the parked car and stepped warily out.

Nobody paid the slightest attention to him. Surging masses of people pushed eagerly forward, trying to get within hearing distance of the rally. Army uniforms predominated, and at the perimeter of the cleared area, a line of tanks and major weapons was displayed—formidable armament still in production.

Army had erected a metal speaker's stand and ascending steps. Behind the stand hung the vast AFWA banner, emblem of the combined powers that had fought in the war. By a curious corrosion of time, the AFWA Veterans' League included officers from the war-time enemy. But a general was

a general and fine distinctions had faded over the years.

Occupying the first rows of seats sat the high brass of the AFWA command. Behind them came junior commissioned officers. Regimental banners swirled in a variety of colors and symbols. In fact, the occasion had taken on the aspect of a festive pageant. On the raised stand itself sat stern-faced dignitaries of the Veterans' League, all of them tense with expectancy. At the extreme edges, almost unnoticed, waited a few police units, ostensibly to keep order. Actually, they were informants making observations. If order were kept, the Army would maintain it.

The late-afternoon wind carried the muffled booming of many people packed tightly together. As Anderton made his way through the dense mob he was engulfed by the solid presence of humanity. An eager sense of anticipation held everybody rigid. The crowd seemed to sense that something spectacular was on the way. With difficulty, Anderton forced his way past the rows of seats and over to the tight knot of Army officials at the edge of the platform.

Kaplan was among them. But he was now General Kaplan.

The vest, the gold pocket watch, the cane, the conservative business suit—all were gone. For this event, Kaplan had got his old uniform from its mothballs. Straight and impressive, he stood surrounded by what had been his general staff.

He wore his service bars, his medals, his boots, his decorative short-sword, and his visored cap. It was amazing how transformed a bald man became under the stark potency of an officer's peaked and visored cap.

Noticing Anderton, General Kaplan broke away from his group and strode to where the younger man was standing. The expression on his thin, mobile countenance showed how incredulously glad he was to see the Commissioner of Police.

"This is a surprise," he informed Anderton, holding out his small gray-gloved hand. "It was my impression you had been taken in by the acting Commissioner."

"I'm still out," Anderton answered shortly, shaking hands. "After all, Witwer has that same reel of tape." He indicated the package Kaplan clutched in his steely fingers and met the man's gaze confidently.

In spite of his nervousness, General Kaplan was in good humor. "This is a great occasion for the Army," he revealed. "You'll be glad to hear I'm going to give the public a full account of the spurious charge brought against you."

"Fine," Anderton answered non-committally.

"It will be made clear that you were unjustly accused." General Kaplan was trying to discover what Anderton knew. "Did Fleming have an opportunity to acquaint you with the situation?"

"To some degree," Anderton replied. "You're going to read only the minority report? That's all you've got there?"

"I'm going to compare it to the majority report." General Kaplan signalled an aide and a leather briefcase was produced. "Everything is here—all the evidence we need," he said. "You don't mind being an example, do you? Your case symbolizes the unjust arrests of countless individuals." Stiffly, General Kaplan examined his wristwatch. "I must begin. Will you join me on the platform?"

"Why?"

Coldly, but with a kind of repressed vehemence, General Kaplan said: "So they can see the living proof. You and I together—the killer and his victim. Standing side by side, exposing the whole sinister fraud which the police have been operating."

"Gladly," Anderton agreed. "What are we waiting for?"

Disconcerted, General Kaplan moved toward the platform. Again, he glanced uneasily at Anderton, as if visibly wondering why he had appeared and what he really knew. His uncertainty grew as Anderton willingly mounted the steps of the platform and found himself a seat directly beside the speaker's podium.

"You fully comprehend what I'm going to be saying?" General Kaplan demanded. "The exposure will have considerable repercussions. It may cause the Senate to reconsider

the basic validity of the Precrime system."

"I understand," Anderton answered, arms folded. "Let's go."

A hush had descended on the crowd. But there was a restless, eager stirring when General Kaplan obtained the briefcase and began arranging his material in front of him.

"The man sitting at my side," he began, in a clean, clipped voice, "is familiar to you all. You may be surprised to see him, for until recently he was described by the police as a dangerous killer."

The eyes of the crowd focussed on Anderton. Avidly, they peered at the only potential killer they had ever been privileged to see at close range.

"Within the last few hours, however," General Kaplan continued, "the police order for his arrest has been cancelled, because former Commissioner Anderton voluntarily gave himself up? No, that is not strictly accurate. He is sitting here. He has not given himself up, but the police are no longer interested in him. John Allison Anderton is innocent of any crime in the past, present, and future. The allegations against him were patent frauds, diabolical distortions of a contaminated penal system based on a false premise—a vast, impersonal engine of destruction grinding men and women to their doom."

Fascinated, the crowd glanced from Kaplan to Anderton. Every-

one was familiar with the basic situation.

"Many men have been seized and imprisoned under the so-called prophylactic Precrime structure," General Kaplan continued, his voice gaining feeling and strength. "Accused not of crimes they have committed, *but of crimes they will commit*. It is asserted that these men, if allowed to remain free, will at some future time commit felonies.

"But there can be no valid knowledge about the future. As soon as precognitive information is obtained, *it cancels itself out*. The assertion that this man will commit a future crime is paradoxical. The very act of possessing this data renders it spurious. In every case, without exception, the report of the three police precogs has invalidated their own data. If no arrests had been made, there would still have been no crimes committed."

Anderton listened idly, only half-hearing the words. The crowd, however, listened with great interest. General Kaplan was now gathering up a summary made from the minority report. He explained what it was and how it had come into existence.

From his coat pocket, Anderton slipped out his gun and held it in his lap. Already, Kaplan was laying aside the minority report, the precognitive material obtained from "Jerry." His lean, bony fingers groped for the summary of first, "Donna," and after that, "Mike."

"This was the original majority report," he explained. "The assertion, made by the first two precogs, that Anderton would commit a murder. Now here is the automatically invalidated material. I shall read it to you." He whipped out his rimless glasses, fitted them on his nose, and started slowly to read.

A queer expression appeared on his face. He halted, stammered, and abruptly broke off. The papers fluttered from his hands. Like a cornered animal, he spun, crouched, and dashed from the speaker's stand.

For an instant his distorted face flashed past Anderton. On his feet now, Anderton raised the gun, stepped quickly forward, and fired. Tangled up in the rows of feet projecting from the chairs that filled the platform, Kaplan gave a single shrill shriek of agony and fright. Like a ruined bird, he tumbled, fluttering and flailing, from the platform to the ground below. Anderton stepped to the railing, but it was already over.

Kaplan, as the majority report had asserted, was dead. His thin chest was a smoking cavity of darkness, crumbling ash that broke loose as the body lay twitching.

Sickened, Anderton turned away, and moved quickly between the rising figures of stunned Army officers. The gun, which he still held, guaranteed that he would not be interfered with. He leaped from the platform and edged into the

chaotic mass of people at its base. Stricken, horrified, they struggled to see what had happened. The incident, occurring before their very eyes, was incomprehensible. It would take time for acceptance to replace blind terror.

At the periphery of the crowd, Anderton was seized by the waiting police. "You're lucky to get out," one of them whispered to him as the car crept cautiously ahead.

"I guess I am," Anderton replied remotely. He settled back and tried to compose himself. He was trembling and dizzy. Abruptly, he leaned forward and was violently sick.

"The poor devil," one of the cops murmured sympathetically.

Through the swirls of misery and nausea, Anderton was unable to tell whether the cop was referring to Kaplan or to himself.

It didn't much matter.

X

FOUR BURLY policemen assisted Lisa and John Anderton in the packing and loading of their possessions. In fifty years, the ex-Commissioner of Police had accumulated a vast collection of material goods. Somber and pensive, he stood watching the procession of crates on their way to the waiting trucks.

By truck they would go directly to the field—and from there to Centaurus X by inter-system transport. A long trip for an old man.

But he wouldn't have to make it back.

"There goes the second from the last crate," Lisa declared, absorbed and preoccupied by the task. In sweater and slacks, she roamed through the barren rooms, checking on last-minute details. "I suppose we won't be able to use these new atronic appliances. They're still using electricity on Cent-ten."

"I hope you don't care too much," Anderton said.

"We'll get used to it," Lisa replied, and gave him a fleeting smile. "Won't we?"

"I hope so. You're positive you'll have no regrets. If I thought—"

"No regrets," Lisa assured him. "Now suppose you help me with this crate."

As they boarded the lead truck, Witwer drove up in a patrol car. He leaped out and hurried up to them, his face looking strangely haggard. "Before you take off," he said to Anderton, "you'll have to give me a break-down on the situation with the precogs. I'm getting inquiries from the Senate. They want to find out if the middle report, the retraction, was an error—or what." Confusedly, he finished: "I still can't explain it. The minority report was wrong, wasn't it?"

"Which minority report?" Anderton inquired, amused.

Witwer blinked. "Then that *is* it. I might have known."

Seated in the cabin of the truck, Anderton got out his pipe and shook tobacco into it. With Lisa's lighter he ignited the tobacco and began operations. Lisa had gone back to the house, wanting to be sure nothing vital had been overlooked.

"There were three minority reports," he told Witwer, enjoying the young man's confusion. Someday, Witwer would learn not to wade into situations he didn't fully understand. Satisfaction was Anderton's final emotion. Old and worn-out as he was, he had been the only one to grasp the real nature of the problem.

"The three reports were consecutive," he explained. "The first was 'Donna.' In that time-path, Kaplan told me of the plot, and I promptly murdered him. 'Jerry,' phased slightly ahead of 'Donna,' used her report as data. He factored in my knowledge of the report. In that, the second time-path, all I wanted to do was to keep out of the detention camp and prevent you from taking over my job. It wasn't Kaplan I wanted to kill. It was my own position and life I was interested in."

"And 'Mike' was the third report? That came *after* the minority report?" Witwer corrected himself. "I mean, it came last?"

"'Mike' was the last of the three, yes. Faced with the knowledge of the first report, I had decided *not* to kill Kaplan. That produced report two. But faced

with *that* report, I changed my mind back. Report two, situation two, was the situation Kaplan wanted to create. It was to the advantage of the police to recreate position one. And by that time I was thinking of the police. I had figured out what Kaplan was doing. The third report invalidated the second one in the same way the second one invalidated the first. That brought us back where we started from."

Lisa came over, breathless and gasping. "Let's go—we're all finished here." Lithe and agile, she ascended the metal rungs of the truck and squeezed in beside her husband and the driver. The latter obediently started up his truck and the others followed.

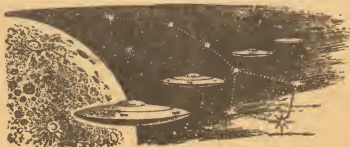
"Each report was different," Anderton concluded. "Each was unique. But two of them agreed on one point. If left free, *I would kill Kaplan*. That created the illusion of a majority report. Actually, that's all it was—an illusion. 'Donna' and 'Mike' previewed the

same event—but in two totally different time-paths, occurring under totally different situations. 'Donna' and 'Jerry' were incorrect: the so-called minority report and half of the majority report. Of the three, 'Mike' was correct—since no report came after his, to invalidate him. That sums it up."

Anxiously, Witwer trotted along beside the truck, his smooth, blond face creased with worry. "Will it happen again? Should we overhaul the set-up?"

"It can happen in only one circumstance," Anderton said. "My case was unique, since I had access to the data. It *could* happen again—but only to the next Police Commissioner. So watch your step." Briefly, he grinned, deriving no inconsiderable comfort from Witwer's strained expression. Beside him, Lisa's red lips twitched and her hand reached out and closed over his.

"Better keep your eyes open," he informed young Witwer. "It might happen to you at any time."



the head hunters

by . . . William Morrison
and Frederik Pohl

The best "man" for a really tough engineering job in space may be a headless robot. But human courage rates a few shining medals too!

IT WAS dull work, changing circuits in a vacuum, where every current-carrying atom had to be insulated against the spark-over of space. John Tinker stood up, yawned, and glanced through the tangle of equipment at the robots walking about outside.

He said into his helmet radio: "Chop, chop, chop."

He couldn't see the girl's face, but her voice was disconcerted. "Chop—What are you talking about?"

"Them." He waved at the robots. "Carrying their heads like old Anne Boleyn." He sang: "With 'er 'ead tooked underneath 'er arm, she walks the bleddy Tower—"

The girl said: "They aren't heads. They're apex-mounted sense receptors. They aren't arms. They're powered torsional manipulators. They aren't 'tucked.' The heads are plug-in. I mean—the receptors are plug-in, bayonet-mounted, and they fit at the apex while in use or in a dummy female base under the manipulator for carrying."

Tinker said simply, "S. Cottrell, I love you."

When such a superlatively gifted storyteller as William Morrison—remember his HOLLYWOOD HABIT, and DATE OF PUBLICATION, 2083 A.D.—joins quills with Frederik Pohl of Ballantine pocket book fame an entertainment special is virtually assured. Here's a documentary-type saga of interplanetary engineering and space hazards incalculable that starts brilliantly, gathers momentum with every breathtaking development on the frontiers of tomorrow, and ends with a smash climax that will set you to pondering for a long, long time.

He thought he heard a snort over the radio, and he sighed. All the same, it gave him a queer feeling to see the headless creatures with the steel skulls clasped casually under their arms.

He had tried to tell his partner, Drake, about it once; but Drake was not a sensitive man. He had pointed out very quickly that there was nothing feminine or fragile about the robots, and had elaborated on the remark with a long obscene outburst about the lack of females on the asteroids.

Tinker, listening, had marveled; some of the words he had never heard before. No doubt a man had to go through Drake's special training—in six jails—to learn them.

The girl said resentfully, "Are you going to help me or not?"

"It's time to take a break," Tinker objected. "Let's watch the robots." He waved at them as he spoke.

She hesitated, but she stood up and joined him. He wished he could see her face through the helmet of the space suit. She said: "I'd think you'd be used to them by now."

"I don't spend much time here," he reminded her. "As you know, Drake and I have our quarters on Asteroid B, and we only come over here for trouble-shooting or check-ups—half an hour or an hour at a time. It isn't safe to stay long."

"You've been here five hours already."

"I won't be here for six, though. Not if Drake will get off his back and show up." He added: "Anyway, this is a special occasion. It's worth taking on a little extra radio-activity to be with somebody like you."

"Sure, somebody female," the girl agreed. "*Anybody* female."

He shrugged. It was true, in a way. It had been three months since he had seen a woman, any woman—or any man or child, for that matter, except himself and his partner. And Drake didn't count. Tinker, striving to be just, had to face the fact that Drake wasn't a man. He was a rat, with the fierce and treacherous disposition of a rat. In effect, Tinker lived alone—and he didn't like it.

But on the other hand, he liked this girl, even though he had never seen her face. Her voice alone made her seem maddeningly desirable—it was so warm and friendly.

He stared at her, trying to see through the faceplate, and quickly realizing that it was flatly impossible, unless he focused his headlamp directly in her eyes. There was no refracted light to illuminate the inside of her helmet, since refraction cannot take place in the absence of air. He could only determine with certainty, under the helmet and the protective armor, that she *did* have a face—and that she could stand on her own two legs. Whether the face was pretty, whether the legs would get a second look from him on Earth, he

couldn't tell—and it was posing a threat to his sanity.

She said, half-laughing, "I thought you were watching the robots."

"I'd rather watch you."

Her laughter became wholly unconstrained. "You're space happy," she warned. "I could easily be three times your age. You don't even know what I look like."

"You sound incredibly young," he told her. "Anyway, you aren't too old to be charming. They don't send hundred-year-old women to the asteroids."

"No," she admitted. "But the retirement age is sixty."

"You aren't sixty either," he said positively. "You might even be under thirty."

There really was some danger on Asteroid A. The automatic isotope plants, robot-run and remotely located in space, were a vital cog in the wheel of isotope manufacture. If anything went wrong on A, it could explode and destroy everything on its surface. But even if it took its nearest planetary neighbor—Asteroid Y-335 B—with it, the only lives at stake would be Tinker's and his partner's. And his partner, he was convinced, would be no great loss.

Of course, an explosion was unlikely. But there *had* been a disastrous blowup on Venus which had caused the Main Office hastily to set about locating new plantsides in the asteroid belt. So it was possible, theoretically—and even with-

out a blowup, there was constant radiation seepage on A.

The healthiest man was better off if he stayed a maximum of six hours at a stretch—twenty-four would certainly have been fatal—and sick and decrepit individuals weren't supposed to be there at all. Sixty? No, Tinker told himself, she couldn't be a day over thirty. Well, forty, maybe . . .

"What's your first name?" he demanded suddenly.

"My what?"

"Your first name. You said it was S. Cottrell. What does the 'S.' stand for?"

She said dubiously, "Siria. My father was—"

"I know," he said exultantly. "You're twenty-five! Your father named you in honor of the Sirius Expedition—you and possibly ten thousand other unfortunates. So it follows, as a mathematical corollary, that you can't be a day over twenty-five."

She said stiffly, "I happen to be twenty-three."

"Even better," said Tinker. "Siria, will you marry me?"

"No. Now, do we get back to work? Or do *I* get back to work and you go home?"

II

TINKER wasn't a fool, for all that he liked to play games. The two of them went back to work. Around them, as they labored at the difficult task of rearranging the

circuits in accordance with Siria Cottrell's wiring diagrams, fresh from the Home Office, the robots moved mechanically about their affairs. They were making isotopes, and it was no concern of their electronic brains if human visitors decided to change the way in which they made them.

In vast, open-walled buildings on the far side of the asteroid, atomic nuclei were reacting. The process was slow, by atomic standards, but it was steady, and it went on day and night, week and month and year without end. The cascade refiners turned out a constant stream of ultra-pure, long-life isotope ingots, and the unmanned space ships came in a steady stream to the little five-mile chunks of rock, arriving empty, and departing with full loads.

It was a scene of never-ceasing activity, but soundless—without air—and the busiest components of the landscape, the reactors and refiners, remained out of sight. Equally invisible was the radiation range, except for a comparatively tiny seepage.

Of course, the seepage didn't bother the robots, for their special sensory receptors—the instruments which Tinker called the "heads"—were in dummy sockets and not plugged in at the apex. Their usual sense organs, located in the torso itself, had what the manuals described as "*Class I adjacent-band interference rejection.*" In other words, they weren't very sensitive.

But the heads, designed to pick up minute sparks from defective equipment, and used only for diagnosing breakdowns, were so abnormally sensitive that they were eventually certain to pick up constant static signals from the reactors.

That meant, of course, that they couldn't be worn all the time. The robot "neural" system was almost inflexible but constant faint signals would derange it, confuse the robot reflexes and eventually lead to a condition that the manuals defined as "*crystalline neurosis.*"

Crystalline neurosis indeed! But Tinker knew what it meant in practice, at least. It meant that something had gone wrong that the robots themselves couldn't repair, and that was why he and Drake were handily next door, sweating out their contract time in a well-insulated space house equipped with air and water purifiers, on Asteroid B.

The radio crackled in Tinker's ear. "What's the matter with that one?" the girl demanded.

Tinker looked up. The girl was standing over him, working on an overhead grouping of the circuits—except that she wasn't actually working. She was staring out at the scene beyond the shed, where one of the robots was down on the rock, kicking feebly.

Tinker said, "Our excellent friend is busted. A part wore out, I suppose. We may as well watch, and see how they fix it."

Scarcely a minute later two more

robots appeared and moved purposefully toward the fallen one. As they advanced the two new arrivals tugged their heads free from under their arms, and shifted them to their broad metal "shoulders." A slight twist, and they were no longer headless.

The girl said humbly, "Tinker, explain it to me, please? I know all about the manuals—I helped write parts of them. But it all looks so different out here in the field."

Tinker said, "Glad to oblige. You're familiar with central control—the computer that programs all the robots? Well, when one of them breaks down, the nearest adjacent unit gets a distress signal. Instantly our dutiful friends stick their heads on—just as those two did. And—well, look."

The two robots had suddenly become mechanics. With incredible, expert swiftness they had their fallen companion in sections, right there on the rock. The tiny individual parts were passed before the region where their eyes would have been—if the "head" had possessed eyes—in a complex gesture which the girl was sure involved some sort of testing.

It took hardly a minute before one of the newcomers located the faulty part—a worn out thermocouple. The second quickly detached his head again, and somehow managed to open a section of it. Out of the cavity thus exposed came a duplicate thermocouple to replace the old one. In another

minute all three of the robots had their heads off and stored once more. The damaged one, looking assured, immediately sprang to his feet, and resumed his interrupted task.

"Clever, isn't it?" Tinker said. "Tool chest, stockroom, testing instruments—all in one."

The girl said doubtfully, "But why do they have their own individual heads? I should think just a couple scattered around the asteroid would suffice."

"Why does every Ford have a jack in the luggage compartment?" Tinker asked. "Isn't it obvious? They're built to be self-sufficient. And they just about have to be, Siria. This is a very small asteroid. Quite frequently Drake and I kick ourselves uncomfortably far off the surface, to where the artificial gravity in our suits won't bring us back. The robots don't even have artificial gravity, and if anything went wrong with *them* out in space, they'd have to repair themselves."

"I see what you mean," the girl said. "But are you seriously suggesting that those heads can handle anything that goes wrong?"

"No, of course not," Tinker said. "Not by themselves, at any rate. They're just testing equipment and so on. The brains—the repair patterns, if you don't like your robot men so anthropomorphic—are in the central control system. Do you know," he went on quite irrelevantly, "that you have beautiful eyes?"

She laughed after a moment. "It may have been three months since you saw a woman. But you haven't forgotten the meaning of a smooth line. Let's get back to work."

A moment later a flicker in the corner of her eye caught the girl's attention, and she glanced up, startled. Overhead a large black shape was blotting out a chunk of the skyful of stars.

Tinker laughed. "B," he said simply.

She nodded, staring. It had been a growing mountain, off on the horizon far to her left, a cold asteroid Paricutin, getting taller by the moment. Now it had separated and was floating free. Even as they watched, it climbed higher in the sky, looking like some plunging hell-bomb above a city pin-pointed for atomic disaster on a tragically conclusive scale.

"It isn't falling," Tinker reassured her. "It's just home sweet home—Asteroid Y-335 B."

"I know it isn't falling," she breathed, drawing closer to him. "It's just that I can't get used to its being up there at all."

Tinker sighed. "I have to get used to it because I'd be homeless if it disappeared. Atmosphere artificial, gravity equally plush-velvet. Time of revolution for the binary pair, seventy-five minutes. Population, two—John Tinker, probably lunatic adventurer, and George Drake, possibly dangerously sane rat."

She glanced at him thoughtfully. "It's easy to see that you don't like Drake."

"You haven't met Drake," he explained. "Anyway, it's not as bad as it might be. There are, I'll concede, certain physical comforts. The air is kept fresh, and the food is extremely tasty. The drinks taste good—even though they're non-intoxicating. There is continual *radio* contact with women on Earth—also non-intoxicating. That's why, Siria," he went on earnestly, "I have been urging you to join our little band. *You* are intoxicating. Will you—"

"Tinker," she said with reproachful insistence, "will you please keep your mind on business? Will you please—what's that?"

The B asteroid was still hovering high in the sky but now a tiny black dot was moving out from it, precisely as the planetoid itself had separated from the horizon. They watched it wordlessly for a moment. They could see that it was expanding slowly, changing its shape as it grew. It shrank, and lengthened, dwindled, and swelled, but always its longest aspect was greater than it had been a moment before.

"Drake," said Tinker proudly, "is a rank amateur."

"An amateur?"

"At the jump," Tinker explained. "We have jet-assists to get us from one asteroid to another if we need them. But if we aren't in a

hurry we jump. It's just as safe, and far more comfortable."

"But suppose you miss?"

"We never miss," Tinker said with quiet dignity. But honesty made him add: "Anyway, it's perfectly safe. We have to cut the artificial gravity in our bootsoles to jump—and if it looks as if we're drifting off course we just switch it on again. But Drake's a clumsy amateur. Look at the way he spins! Four or five turns a minute, easy."

"And you?"

"One turn a minute, maximum." He made a regal gesture. "Don't applaud, please. Well—he won't be here for twenty minutes yet. We might as well get back to work."

III

IT WAS nearer twenty-five minutes before Drake's body, upside down, floated gently past one of the reaction buildings. He caught at an edge, righted himself on the fly, and then let himself drift gently down beside them. On the ground he turned on his bootsole gravitators and stood upright and at ease.

He took a deep breath.

"Greetings!" his voice rattled in their helmets, with an obvious attempt at geniality. "Tinker, you skunk, I heard you talking to our friend on the radio. Why didn't you tell me she was a girl?"

"I always have been a girl, Mr. Drake," said Siria.

"I don't doubt it for a moment,"

said Drake. "Well, so long, Tinker."

Tinker looked at his colleague thoughtfully. "You aren't by any chance in a hurry to get rid of me, are you?"

"Of course not, Tinker. Good-bye."

The girl said, "Thanks for everything, Tinker. You've been a real help. Another hour and we'll have the new circuits installed, so I guess I won't be seeing you again. It really is good-bye."

Tinker thought out loud, "It's only been seven hours. Maybe I'll just stick around and—"

"No, no," said Drake hastily. "Don't take unnecessary risks, Tinker. Radioactivity's dangerous stuff."

"Well—" Tinker looked rather desperately toward the horizon. "I'll tell you what," he said. "Your space ship's gravity-stabilized, Siria. I'll just climb into it for a while. I'll be safe and insulated against radiation, and then—"

"Tinker," said Drake reproachfully, "we'd love to have you stay. But I started the coffeemaker for you in the spacehouse. You know how unreasonable that gadget is. If you aren't there in half an hour it will spatter coffee all over the kitchen."

"Damn it, Drake," Tinker remonstrated angrily. "I ought to wring your neck."

The girl was laughing. "Really, Tinker," she said, "I'll be perfectly all right here with Mr. Drake.

Go ahead before I start worrying about you."

"Will you drop in for a cup of coffee before you go back to Earth?"

"All right," Siria promised. "Now go ahead!"

Tinker glared at Drake, but no expression was visible through his partner's faceplate. It wasn't like the man to be gallant. From his long winter-evening reminiscences, extremely primitive lovemaking was more his style. Still—Siria was pretty well protected by the radiation field, if nothing else, to say nothing of the lack of atmosphere. It would take a genius even to get a look at her face under the circumstances.

And, Tinker admitted to himself, he *was* undergoing more radiation exposure than safety considerations could possibly sanction, especially since he had three months more to go on his tour of duty.

Likely enough Drake was relying on his massive male personality to make an impression on Siria for some later occasion. "Okay," Tinker said reluctantly. "But that's a promise, Siria. See you later."

Asteroid B was low on the horizon, but by careful manipulation of the bootsole gravitators Tinker could spiral after it. He took a little run to gather speed, cut the gravity and leapt boldly into space.

As he sailed away, spinning in the sedate pace on which he prided himself, he could see Drake and the girl turning toward the circuit

sheds once more. He caught a few words of explanation from Siria to the man about the circuits, and then the bulk of Asteroid A came between him and the two and shadowed the radio waves. He knew that by the time they were in line-of-sight again, they would be too far from his helmet radio for their voices to carry.

By carefully timing the amount and direction of gravitator flow Tinker swung around in a spiral toward the spacehouse on Asteroid B. He made his corrections early, and as B ascended above the horizon he zeroed in with error-allowing caution toward the building where he and Drake lived.

He leaned back against his armor and relaxed in the void.

It was a wonderful feeling to float free from the tug of gravity, to sail gently upward while heart and lungs and brain relaxed completely. He stared drowsily at the hard, bright stars . . .

It was not, however, so wonderful that he could afford to fall asleep, and risk sailing so far past B that he'd never be able to return. He shook himself and kept his eyes open, watching the universe spin around and around while he whirled gently on his own axis.

"That lying skunk!" ranted Tinker. "He just wanted to get me out of the way!"

He stared in bitter fury at the cold and empty coffeemaker, which had *not* been left turned on! He should have known that the last

thing in the universe Drake would ever think of doing was a favor for someone else.

He started the coffee and then surlily seated himself before the TV screen. A filmplay was coming through from Deimos Relay, but he was unable to concentrate on it.

He found himself seeing instead what he imagined to be the face of Siria Cottrell. He really was getting space-happy, letting himself become torn up over a girl whose face he had never even seen!

But it was curiously pleasant.

He glanced at his watch. He'd been gone exactly half an hour. Not more than an hour to wait, at most, before he'd be seeing her again. But he felt uneasy in an inexplicable way. Not so inexplicable, though, he realized. It was the thought of Drake alone with the girl that bothered him. Drake was an unmitigated scoundrel.

Most of the men the Company assigned to lonely outposts like Binary Y-335 were carefully picked volunteers. But there were exceptions, and Drake was one of the really bad ones. An ugly record of convictions for nine crimes. It was amazing that the authorities had accepted Drake's petition for voluntary psychiatric treatment.

Of course, there was such a thing as pressure on the parole board, Tinker reminded himself, and it was quite possible such pressure had been applied. At any rate, the "voluntary dangerous labor" assignment after the psychiatry had

turned out to be the same "high-bonus" job which Tinker had so eagerly volunteered for.

Anyway, even if there had been successful psychiatry, it was down the drain now. Three months on the lonely asteroid with Tinker had opened big cracks in Drake's facade of adjustment. He had become more and more morose, spiteful, and selfish.

It would have been a difficult enough assignment for even a stable personality. But for Drake it brought to the surface his enormous instinct for selfishness—the world-hatred of the compulsive and rejected man.

Tinker found himself at the window-plate, staring at Asteroid A. But the buildings where Drake and the girl had joined forces were still beyond his range of vision. A few minutes later, however, they came into view and Tinker, no longer even pretending to watch the filmplay, began grimly hanging on to the eyepiece of the big telescope.

He scanned Asteroid A carefully. The streets were occupied—but only with the headless robots, still stalking around on their cryptic errands. The building that housed the great electronic brain looked empty.

But he found them at last.

They seemed to be walking almost arm in arm, in a sort of ungainly waltz. But, though the distorted perspective made it hard to see the pattern of that incredible

"dance," Tinker recognized it for what it was.

Drake was walking toward the girl's space ship. And Siria, beside him, was bobbing aimlessly as his arm tugged her along. He was forcibly dragging her.

Tinker wasted no time in reproaching himself. He struggled into his space suit and was outside in a matter of seconds. There was a rocket launcher just outside, designed for quick emergency transportation from B to A.

He was facing an emergency now. He stepped into the rocket-boots, cut his gravity, and pulled the switch. Almost immediately Asteroid A swelled to the dimensions of a celestial melon, mottled and light-rimmed in the void above him. Swiftly it grew larger, filling the entire viewscreen, becoming a variegated relief map of familiar design.

IV

TEN MINUTES later he slammed against Asteroid A's surface, braked a trifle by the bootsole gravitators, and guided by precision calculations and his desperate need to arrive at his destination in time.

He clawed his way upright just as Drake was lifting the girl to the hatch of her radiation-insulated space ship.

Drake saw him at once, and sprang toward him. There was no concealment now. Tinker knew what the cost would be if he lost.

There was small chance that Drake would let him live any longer than he thought desirable. It would be easy to imprison him in the space ship and send it rocketing off into outer space forever. The flat-barreled, compact little gun in Drake's hand made his intentions perfectly plain.

"Drop it!" Tinker yelled; and the moment's surprise gave him the split-second he needed.

Drake hesitated only a tiny fraction of a breath. But drawing and aiming with space-gauntlets was slow work and before he could get the weapon into firing position Tinker was at his knees, bringing him down. Drake kicked out, swearing violently. The heavy boot caught Tinker in his middle, folding him up. He coughed and gasped and squirmed erect, clutching for the gun.

The slender metal rod wouldn't kill him. It wasn't built for that under any circumstances, and the heavy shielding of the space suit would ground most of the charge. But it would stun him at the least, put him out for minutes—and Drake would need only a few seconds to hack a hole in the delicate jointure between neck and shoulders, or the vulnerable spot at the armpits. Then the air in Tinker's suit would go hissing out into the void, carrying Tinker's life with it.

Drake kicked at him again, but he juggled the gun and dropped it. Without gravity of its own the weapon spun lazily in the air, hang-

ing and floating slowly like a toy balloon. Drake clutched at it like a madman grabbing at phantom flies, but Tinker was there before him.

He didn't try to grab the gun, only to knock it away. And he succeeded. It clattered against his helmet and bounced off, up and away—meters high and still going. The chances were good that it was gone forever, beyond B's tiny gravity. At the least, it was out of reach for either Tinker or Drake for a good long while.

Drake copied Tinker's tactics and butted the smaller man as Tinker had butted the gun. But Tinker anticipated the move. The moment his partner thudded into him he switched off his gravity. He went flying against the side of the ship and scrambled around the hull, kicking against it until the impact sent him flying back at Drake.

Both men were out of breath by now. But that was all. It was a crazy fight, Tinker thought, throwing himself at the other man again. The space suits were perfect protection against anything they could do to each other barehanded.

If one of them could have gained a moment to find a gun, a knife—even a heavy bar—the odds would have shifted in his favor. But barehanded, they were equal and invulnerable, like two giant herbivorous saurians thumping each other toothlessly over a luscious patch of weed.

They each had weak spots, of

course. But they were hard to get to, except manually. The gloves were thin and flexible, by comparison, as they had to be. But both men were aware of that and were careful to keep their hands out of danger. The result was that neither Tinker nor Drake, however desperately they struggled and charged, could inflict decisive punishment. The only outcome, Tinker thought, breathlessly resentful, would be that one of them would drop of a heart attack.

But he was wrong.

Drake's clumsiness won him the fight. He lunged at Tinker and slipped and wriggled free. But Tinker had caught him by the leg and whirled him around. Drake, panicky, kicked at Tinker's sensitive hand. And Tinker let go. The instant he did so Drake went flying through the space above the incurious, busy robots, straight against the side of the space ship.

Tinker leaped after him, but he was too late. He struck the side of the ship and bounded away, and before he could right himself Drake was scuttling into the open hatch.

Tinker, abruptly warned, came hurtling back. But by now the hatch was closing.

Tinker leaped back a couple of yards and stared. What was Drake up to? In a moment he found out. The little ship, no more than five yards long, shuddered and bucked once at the touch of an unfamiliar hand on the controls.

And then it rose gently into the void and came at Tinker.

Tinker flattened himself against the ground, and the ship missed him by a hair. But it was small and responsive. It stopped and whirled and came at him again. He could see Drake's looming ugly helmet over the control board, through the forward view plate. He dodged again and stopped down his gravitators. He ran with zigzag, plunging strides.

But the ship swooped toward him, not fast, but with deadly persistence, twisting around the corner of a building after him, picking up speed on the straight-away. He tried to stay close to the building wall, but even as clumsy a pilot as Drake could put that little ship just where he wanted it.

Tinker dodged and ducked a fraction of a second too late, and caught a jolt from the vessel's underbelly on his shoulder that sent him spinning into the wall. He rolled over, half dazed, to see the ship stop dead, and move back toward him with rapidly increasing speed.

The chances were very good that he would be crushed to death then and there.

There was a space in the building wall beside him. He scrambled through, just in time. The ship's hull shook the supporting beams behind him.

Tinker stood up and looked around for some object that might serve as a weapon. But it

was a hope that quickly died. He could see Siria lying, motionless, yards away beside another building, and the thought occurred to him that it was only a question of time before Drake would get back to her. The fear in his mind became almost unendurable.

There wasn't much time for thinking. He felt a vibration in his bootsoles and looked up to see the prow of the ship slicing through the roof of the building.

There wasn't any choice. He dodged behind a group of wiring panels, took a deep breath, and leaped for the girl. He dodged past the headless robots, who paid him no attention at all, and reached her while the ship was still methodically crushing the building he had just left.

Siria was stirring. Tinker dragged her hastily inside another building. He shook her to get her attention, then held a gauntleted finger up before his faceplate in an awkward "ssh" gesture. Miraculously, she understood him. Drake might not have the ship's radio tuned to the helmet-talk wavelengths. But it was a circumstance he couldn't count on.

Beneath the buildings was a partial network of tunnels, built mostly to serve as ducts for electric and communications cables which could not be left exposed to the radiation from the reactors and the cosmic rays. They had been enlarged in some parts to serve as storage space, and when Tinker

hunted for an entrance he quickly found one.

They were safe, at least for the moment. "We can talk now," Tinker said reassuringly. "The rock will ground our radio. How do you feel?"

Her voice sounded shaky. "I have a headache—that much I know. He hit me with a wrench."

Tinker nodded thoughtfully. "It had to be something like that. You're lucky he didn't hit harder. But I guess he intended to spare you until he could get the ship safely off the asteroid."

He could feel the girl shudder. "I've been pursued now and then," she said after a moment, "but nothing like this. It's a frightening thing, Tinker."

Tinker said: "I don't think it was just you, Siria. He's crazy but—not that crazy. I think he's in mortal terror of the law. I guess he thought it would be a good idea to take you with him, but judging from the way he's acting now—" Tinker paused. They could feel the vibrations of Drake's ship, still systematically destroying the debris of the warehouse. "I'm afraid he's changed his mind," Tinker went on grimly. "He'll probably try to kill us both."

"But why?" the girl asked.

Tinker explained, "He's a criminal. He has three years to go on this asteroid before he's technically free. I guess he can't wait. You see, he's never had a chance to get away before, not until you landed in your

ship. The ship's his passport. And consider the wealth here. These isotopes are worth a fortune on the black radioactives market. And your ship is a Company job, with radiation-retarded storage bins—everything he needs."

The girl was silent for a moment. "Does he have to kill us?"

"I'm afraid so, Siria," Tinker said gently. "If he leaves us alive, we'll have the law on him in an hour, and the space patrol would nab him. He needs at least a day's start. He can't even destroy the radio on Asteroid B. If it doesn't send an automatic check signal every ten minutes, the Company will think we've blown up and the patrol will be here anyway."

V

SIRIA rested while Tinker made a scouting trip to the electronic-brain shed. From inside its complex array of circuit boards he could see Drake's ship, now hovering motionless a few yards over the top of a building a hundred yards away. Tinker watched for a long minute, but nothing happened.

He had a worried expression on his face when he rejoined the girl and, though his countenance was invisible to her, she could hear the strain in the voice. "How bad is it?" she asked.

Tinker said, "Bad enough. He's in a pretty favorable spot. So long as he stays in the ship, we can't

touch him. I'm afraid time's working for him. The longer we stay here, the better off he will be. If we stay here more than twenty-four hours, we'll die. The radiation *could* kill us in fifteen hours."

She was silent for a moment. "I see," was all she said.

"On the other hand," resumed Tinker, more confidently, "there must be *something* we can do. Maybe we don't know what it is, but there never was a tactical position so strong it couldn't be attacked. At least we've got that factor working for us."

She hesitated. "Tinker," she said uncertainly, "did I understand what you just said? There's a weakness in his position, and we don't know what it is. We don't know, but—it helps us?"

"Certainly," said Tinker, his voice reassuring. "Consider all the things we might try. First, we could make a jump for the radio on Asteroid B. That won't work, because he'd promptly run us down in the ship. Second, we could attack the ship with our bare hands. That's out too, because we couldn't do it any damage. Third, we could just wait here until he goes away. That won't work, because we'd die of radiation poisoning. Fourth, we could—"

"Tinker!" cried the girl. "You're cracking!"

He smiled. "Not exactly, dear," he said. "There *must* be some weakness in Drake's strategic position."

"But we don't know what it is. You said so yourself!"

"That's true," he conceded. "But you see, Drake doesn't suspect that we don't know. You'll find that situation described in Clausewitz's *Tactics*," he added encouragingly. "Unless I made it up myself."

Siria might have had her doubts about Tinker's sanity, but she grimly followed orders. Most of her engineering knowledge was from textbooks and the drawing board, but she put her mind to practical mechanics and quickly erected the mechanism Tinker had specified out of spare parts in the storage buildings.

The machine glittered and sparkled. It towered higher than her head. It was rude and clumsy in construction, but it had a long, deadly-looking barrel that came out of its vitals and poked threateningly into space. And it did absolutely nothing.

She was staring at it dourly when Tinker scrambled out of the tunnel hatch behind her. He turned his radio volume down as far as possible and, his helmet almost touching hers, asked: "Everything all right?"

"I suppose so," she whispered, "but—"

"Never mind. Any trouble with the robots?"

She shook her head. "They look the same as ever. But I've been staying out of sight, just as you advised, even if they are perfectly harmless."

"They aren't," he said, surprisingly. "But don't worry about it right now."

He stood up cautiously and peered around. Drake's ship was methodically cruising up and down the lanes of buildings, not particularly close. There were individual robots and groups wandering up and down, their "heads" under their arms in their accustomed fashion.

But they were slightly different in some respects now, since Tinker had made certain changes in the master pattern-sets in the electronic brain.

"Drake's looking for us," he reported to the girl, sinking down again. "That's good. It shows he's getting edgy. I don't blame him. He thinks that once he takes care of us, he'll be free. But the longer he waits the greater the chance of some wandering patrol vessel or freighter blundering in, for some message coming through from the Company that starts them wondering. So he's irritable—jumpy. He's desperately anxious to get away."

"So am I," the girl said.

"All right." Tinker stood up again, took a last look. The ship was close at hand, but none of the robots were. Conditions would never be any better. "This is it, Siria," he said, bending close. "In case anything goes wrong, I love you."

A second later, trundling the imitation machine out into the open, he wondered just how much

he had been deceiving himself. Not very much, he decided, almost incredulously. But then he didn't have time to think for quite a while.

The main problem was to move the machine a substantial distance away from any building. He hadn't moved it quite as far as he might have wished when he saw the nose of the ship come suddenly about and head toward him. Drake had sighted him.

Tinker gave a splendid five-second performance of the Courageous Ack-Ack Gunner, sticking to his weapon to the last. He tugged and strained and twisted dials, and sighted through tubes. It was almost too realistic to be safe, because he just barely managed to dive aside in time to dodge Drake's ship.

It was hare-and-hound for several frantic seconds after that, but Tinker had picked his spot and he made it to one of the buildings and into the tunnels. Drake had learned his lesson about the futility of knocking down buildings. He hung irresolute for a moment, then drifted back toward the "weapon."

Tinker stood watching half inside the tunnel for a long moment, with his heart in his mouth. Then, slowly, the hatch began to open.

Drake had taken the bait.

VI

TINKER was through the tunnel and up beside the girl again in a

new speed record for Asteroid Y-335 A. She was crouched behind a wall, as good as her word. He tugged at her, and the two of them raced through the tunnels again to the electronic-brain building.

"Faster!" he urged through the helmet radio. "We don't want to run into any robots here!"

She gasped something in protest, but he didn't bother to answer. Then they were scrambling up through the hatchway into the computer's own building, and he breathed more easily.

"Now," he said. "We wait. Drake's following his script like a little angel. He *had* to take a look at that thing. If it was real, he had to know it, for we might have been able to build another."

"I know," said the girl, sobbing for breath. "But Tinker, what now? He'll just get back in the ship, and we'll be as badly off as ever."

"Wait," said Tinker tensely. He was feeling a reaction now; this was the key moment. He glanced beseechingly at the computer tubes, winking their little electronic messages. He said, with a voice that shook slightly, "I don't like playing God. I've never known what it was deliberately to take a human life before."

"Life?" the girl demanded. "When did you take anybody's life?"

Lights flared up in the computer brain in a blaze, and died again. They flared more brightly, errati-

cally; and the machine seemed to tremble slightly.

Tinker sighed a long weary sigh. "Just now," he said, and began to rip out the additional control circuits he had so frantically installed. "We can go up now. Drake's dead."

Tinker made the girl wait in the shed for a moment. Then he came back, walking slowly, and said, "All right, Siria. Let's go."

She followed him in silence to the space ship. There was no sign of Drake, nothing but the meandering robots, their heads tucked underneath their arms. When they were in the ship and Siria looked back at the asteroid they were leaving, she thought she saw—

"Tinker," she said in a voice that shook. "Look back there, where the ship was—"

He said somberly, "Yes, Siria. That's Drake. The robots took care of him."

"Impossible!" she said. "The robots can't conceivably harm a human being! Every control circuit ever designed has—"

"Has its weaknesses, Siria," Tinker said. "I made a few changes. No—don't interrupt. I couldn't make them attack Drake. But I could change their repair instructions. I put in a new circuit describing a new repair problem—crystalline neurosis.

"It was easy enough, for the basic condition was already in the memory tanks. Robot's head stuck on shoulder. Too many static bursts

accepted as repair signals, with a resultant neurotic behavior pattern on the part of the robot affected. That was all standard. The only change I made was to describe a new type of robot. He swallowed. "One that looked like—like a human being in a space suit. I knew about it, so I kept us out of sight. Drake didn't."

"Tinker!" cried the girl.

He nodded. "So they—repaired him. And the way to repair a stuck apex-mounted receptor, of course, is to take it off and dismember it."

They were silent for a moment while Tinker slipped the little ship into a landing next to the spacehouse. Both were looking gray.

"The computer knew something was wrong," he said, "when they got the—the apex-mounted receptor apart. It wasn't a standard design. So it blew fuses; and that's when I knew it was over."

He helped her wordlessly out of the ship, through the landing tube, into the spacehouse, and tripped the emergency distress signal that would bring the space patrol and the Company's ships arrowing toward them through the interplanetary night.

And then, for the first time, he pushed back her helmet and looked at her.

"Beautiful," he said. "I knew you'd be beautiful."

*Among the Contributors to Next Month's Issue
will be*

SAM MERWIN JR., *with "Passage to Anywhere"*

EDMUND COOPER, *with "The End of the Journey"*

ROGER DEE, *with "The Man Who Had Spiders"*

THEODORE PRATT, *with "Shades of Davy Crockett"*

ETHEL G. LEWIS, *with "The Vapor Horn"*

ROBERT ABERNATHY, *with "Grandma's Lie Soap"*

and many others

wednesday's child

by . . . William Tenn

Some secrets women won't talk about. Others *must* be discussed. Why, for instance, did Wednesday have hairs on her fingernails?

WHEN HE first came to scrutinize Wednesday Gresham with his rimless spectacles and restive blue eyes, Fabian Balik knew nothing of the biological contradictions which were so incredibly a part of her essential body structure. He had not even noticed—as yet—that she was a remarkably pretty girl with eyes like rain-sparkling violets. His original preoccupation with her was solely and specifically as a problem in personnel administration.

All of which was not too surprising, because Fabian Balik was a thoroughly intent, thoroughly sincere young office manager, who had succeeded in convincing his glands conclusively, in several bitter skirmishes, that their interests didn't have a chance against the interests of SLAUGHTER, STARK & SLINGSBY: *Advertising & Public Relations*.

Wednesday was one of the best stenographers in the secretarial pool that was under his immediate supervision. There were, however, small but highly unusual derelictions in her employment history. They consisted of peculiarities

The mutant child genius, and the equally phenomenal adult—man or woman—whose radiant qualities often blend with the multidimensional have not only given science fantasy a "new look" in recent years. They have enlarged its boundaries immeasurably. And now comes William Tenn, a writer of quite phenomenal maturity, with a variation on the theme which will bewitch and astound you. This is the brilliant Mr. Tenn's first appearance in our pages.

which a less dedicated and ambitious personnel man might have put aside as mere trifles, but which Fabian, after a careful study of her six-year record with the firm, felt he could not, in good conscience, ignore. On the other hand, they would obviously require an extended discussion, and he had strong views about cutting into a girl's working time.

Thus, much to the astonishment of the office and the confusion of Wednesday herself, he came up to her one day at noon, and informed her quite calmly that they were going to have lunch together.

"This is a nice place," he announced, when they had been shown to a table. "It's not too expensive, but I've discovered it serves the best food in the city for the price. As it's a bit off the beaten track it never gets too crowded. Only people who know what they want manage to come here. I've always liked that kind of restaurant."

Wednesday glanced around, and smiled. "Yes," she said. "I like it too. I eat here a lot with the girls."

After a moment, Fabian picked up a menu. "I suppose you don't mind if I order for both of us?" he inquired. "The chef is used to my tastes. He'll treat us right."

The girl frowned. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Balik, but—"

"Yes?" he said encouragingly, though he was more than a little surprised. He hadn't expected anything but compliance. After all, she

must surely be palpitating inwardly at being out with him.

"I'd like to order for myself," she said. "I'm on a—a special diet."

He raised his eyebrows and was pleased at the way she blushed. He nodded slowly, with dignity, letting his displeasure come through only in the way he pronounced the next five words. "Very well, if you insist."

A few moments later, however, his curiosity got too strong for him and broke through the ice. "What kind of diet is that?" he asked. "Fresh fruit salad, a glass of tomato juice, raw cabbage, and—a *baked potato*? You can't be seriously trying to lose weight if you eat potatoes."

Wednesday smiled timidly. "I'm not trying to reduce, Mr. Balik. These are all foods rich in Vitamin C. I need a lot of Vitamin C."

Fabian remembered her smile. There had been a few spots of more-than-natural whiteness in it. "Dental trouble?" he inquired.

She nodded, but showed no inclination to pursue the topic. Quickly she countered with: "This is a nice place. There's a restaurant almost like it near where I live. Of course it's a lot cheaper and—"

"Do you live with your parents, Miss Gresham?"

"No, I live alone. I'm a—I'm an orphan."

He waited until the waiter had deposited the first course, then spooned up a bit of the shrimp

and returned to the attack. "Since when?"

She stared at him over her fresh fruit salad. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Balik?"

"Since when? I mean—how long have you been an orphan?"

"Since I was a little baby. Someone left me on the doorstep of a foundling home."

He noticed that while she was replying to his questions in an even tone of voice, she was staring at her food with a good deal of concentration and her blush had become more pronounced. Was she embarrassed at having to admit her probable lack of legitimacy, he wondered. Surely at twenty-four she had grown accustomed to it. Nonsense, of course she had.

"But on your original application form, Miss Gresham, you gave Thomas and Mary Gresham as the names of your parents."

Wednesday had stopped eating and was playing with her water glass. "They were an old couple who adopted me," she said in a very low voice. "They died when I was fifteen. I have no living relatives."

"That you know of," he reminded her, raising a cautionary finger.

Much to Fabian's surprise, she laughed. It was a very odd laugh and made him feel extremely uncomfortable. "That's right, Mr. Balik. I have no living relatives—that I know of." She looked over his shoulder and laughed again.

"That I know of," she repeated, softly to herself.

Fabian felt irritably that the interview was somehow getting away from him. He raised his voice slightly. "Then who is Dr. Morris Lorington?"

She was attentive again. "Dr. Morris Lorington?"

"Yes, the man you said should be notified in the event of an emergency. I mean—if you should meet with an accident while in our employ."

She looked very wary now. Her eyes were narrowed, and she was watching him very closely. Her breathing had become a bit faster, too.

"Dr. Lorington is an old friend," she said. "He—he was the doctor at the orphanage. After the Greshams adopted me, I kept going to him whenever—" Her voice trailed off.

"Whenever you needed medical attention?" Fabian suggested.

"Ye-es," she said, brightening, as if he had come up with an entirely novel reason for consulting a physician. "I saw him whenever I needed medical attention."

Fabian grunted. There was something very wrong but tantalizingly elusive about this whole business. But she was answering his questions with no apparent constraint. He couldn't deny that. She was certainly answering.

"Do you expect to see him next October?" he inquired.

And now Wednesday was no

longer wary. She was frightened. "Next *October?*" she quavered.

Fabian finished the last of his shrimp, and wiped his lips. But he didn't take his eyes from her face. "Yes, next October, Miss Gresham. You've applied for a month's leave of absence, beginning October fifteenth. Five years ago, after you had been working for Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby for thirteen months, you also applied for a leave of absence in October."

He was amazed at how scared she looked. He felt triumphantly that he had been right in looking into the entire matter. The feeling of curiosity he had experienced in connection with her had not been merely that. It had been an instinct of good personnel management as well.

"But I'm not getting *paid* for the time off," she protested. "I'm not asking to be paid for it, Mr. Balik. And I didn't get any vacation allowance the—the other time."

She was clutching her napkin up near her face, giving him the impression that she was getting ready to bolt through the back door of the restaurant. Her blushes had departed with such thoroughness as to leave her skin absolutely white.

"The fact that you're not getting paid, Miss Gresham, is not really—" Before Fabian could complete the remark he was interrupted by the waiter with the entree. By

the time the man had gone, he was annoyed to observe that Wednesday had used the respite to recover some of her poise. While she was still pale, she had a spot of red in each cheek, and she was leaning back in her chair now instead of using the edge of it.

"The fact that you're not getting paid is of no consequence," he continued resolutely. "It's merely logical. After all, you have the customary two weeks of vacation with pay every year. Which brings me to the second point I wanted to discuss with you. You have every year made *two* unusual requests. First, you've asked for an additional week's leave of absence without pay, making three weeks in all. And then you've asked—"

"To take it in the early Spring," she finished for him, her voice entirely under control. "Is there anything wrong with that, Mr. Balik? That way I won't have any conflict with the other girls and the firm will have the satisfaction of knowing that a secretary will be in the office all through the summer."

"There's nothing wrong with such an arrangement *per se*. By that I mean," he said, translating carefully, "that there is nothing wrong with the arrangement if it could stand in complete isolation by itself. But it makes for loose ends, for organizational confusion. And loose ends, Miss Gresham, loose ends and organizational confusion have no place in a well-regulated office."

He was pleased to note that she was looking uncomfortable again.

"Does that mean—that I might be laid off?"

"It could happen," Fabian agreed, neglecting to add that it was, however, very unlikely to happen in the case of a secretary who was as generally efficient on the one hand, and as innocuous on the other, as Wednesday Gresham. With his knife he carefully freed a fork-sized portion of roast beef from its accompanying strip of orange fat before going on.

"Look at it this way," he said. "How would it be if every girl in the office asked for an additional week's leave of absence every year—even if it was without pay, as it would naturally have to be? How would it be if, every few years, they wanted an additional month's leave of absence on top of that? What kind of office would we have, Miss Gresham? Not a well-regulated one, certainly."

As he masticated the roast beef with the requisite thoroughness, he beamed at the thoughtful concern on her face and was mentally grateful that he hadn't had to present a similar line of argument to anyone as sharp as—well, Arlette Stein. He knew what that large-boned and thirtyish bookkeeper would have immediately replied: "But every girl in the office *doesn't* ask for it, Mr. Balik." A heavy sneer at such sophistry would mean little to Stein.

Wednesday, he appreciated, was

not the person to go in for such counter-attacks. She was pursing her lips distressedly and trying to think of a polite, good-employee way out. There was only one, and he was sure she would have to come to it in a moment.

She did.

"Would it help any," she began, and stopped. She took a deep breath. "Would it help any, if I told you the reasons for the—for the leaves-of-absence?"

"It would," he said heartily. "It would indeed, Miss Gresham. That way I, as office manager, can operate from facts instead of mysteries. I can listen to your reasons, weigh them for validity and measure their importance—and your usefulness as a secretary—against the disorganization your absences create in the day-to-day operation of Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby."

"M-m-m." She looked troubled, uncertain. "I'd like to think a bit, if you don't mind."

Fabian waved a cauliflower-filled fork magnanimously. "Take all the time in the world! Think it out carefully. Don't tell me anything you aren't perfectly assured about in your own mind. Of course anything you *do* tell me will, I can promise you, remain completely confidential. I will treat it as official knowledge, Miss Gresham—not personal. And while you're thinking, you might start eating your raw cabbage. Before it gets cold," he added with a rich, executive-type chuckle.

She looked at him with the barest trace of a smile and began working at her plate in an absent-minded, a not-particularly-hungry fashion.

"You see," she began abruptly, as if she'd found a good point of departure, "some things happen to me that don't happen to other people."

"That, I would say, is fairly obvious."

"They're not really bad things. I mean they're not what the newspapers would call bad. And they're not dangerous things, exactly. They're—they're things that happen to my body."

Fabian finished his plate, sat back and crossed his arms. "Could you be just a little more specific?" he urged. "Unless—" He was suddenly struck by a horrifying thought. "Unless they're what what is known as—er—female difficulties. In that case, of course—"

This time she didn't even blush. "Oh, no—not at all. At least, there's very little of that. It's—other things. Like my appendix. Every year I have to have my appendix out."

"Your appendix?" He turned that over in his mind. "*Every year?* But I don't understand. A human being only has one appendix. And once it's removed, it doesn't grow back."

"Mine does," she told him. "On the tenth of April, every single year, I get appendicitis and have to have an operation. That's why I

take my vacation then. And my teeth. Every five years, I lose *all* my teeth. I start losing them about this time, and I have dental plates that were made when I was a little girl. I use them until my teeth grow back—until about the middle of October when the last of them goes, and the new ones start coming up. I can't use dental plates while they're growing, so naturally I look kind of funny for a while. That's why I ask for a leave of absence. In the middle of November, the new teeth are almost full-grown, and I can come back to work."

She took a deep breath and timidly lifted her eyes to his face. She had evidently completed all she had to say. Or wished to say.

All through dessert, he thought about it. He was positive she was telling the truth. A girl like Wednesday Gresham didn't lie. Not to such a fantastic extent, at any rate—and not to her boss.

"Well," he said at last. "It's certainly very unusual."

"Yes," she agreed. "*Very* unusual."

"Do you have anything else the matter with you? I mean, are there any other peculiarities—Oh, darn! Is there anything else?"

Wednesday considered. "There are. But, if you don't mind, Mr. Balik, I'd rather not talk about them."

Fabian decided not to take that. "Now see here, Miss Gresham," he said firmly. "Let us not play games.

You didn't have to tell me anything. But you decided for yourself—for your own good reasons—to do so. Now I must insist on the whole story, and nothing but the whole story. What other physical difficulties do you have?"

It worked. She cringed a bit in her chair, but almost instantly she straightened up again and began: "I'm sorry, Mr. Balik. I wouldn't dream of—of playing games with you. There are lots of other things, but none of them interfere with my work, really. For instance, I have some tiny hairs growing on my fingernails. See?"

Fabian glanced at her hand. There were a few almost microscopic tendrils on each glittering hard surface of fingernail, but he had to strain his eyes to see them.

"What else?" he inquired.

"Well, my tongue. I have a few hairs on the underside of my tongue. They don't bother me, though. They don't bother me in any way. And there's my—my—"

"Yes?" he prompted. *Who could believe that colorless little Wednesday Gresham . . .*

"My navel. I don't have any navel."

"You don't have any— But that's impossible!" he exploded. He felt his glasses sliding down his nose. "Everyone has a navel! Everyone alive—everyone who's ever been born."

Wednesday nodded, her eyes unnaturally bright and large. "I know—" she began, and suddenly,

unexpectedly, broke into tears. She brought her hands up to her face and sobbed through them, great, pounding, wracking sobs that pulled her shoulders up and down, up and down.

Fabian's consternation made him completely helpless. He'd never in his life, been in a crowded restaurant with a crying girl before.

"Now, Miss Gresham—Wednesday," he managed to get out, and he was annoyed to hear a high, skittery note in his own voice. "There's no call for this. It only makes you feel worse. Crying, I mean. Uh—Wednesday?"

"Maybe," she gasped again, between sobs, "m-maybe that's the answer."

"What's the answer?" Fabian asked loudly, desperately hoping to distract her with some kind of conversation.

"About—about being born. What if I wasn't b-born? What if I was m-m-made!"

And then, as if she'd merely been warming up before, she *really* went into hysterics. Fabian Balik at last realized what he had to do. He paid the check, put his arms around her waist and half-carried her out of the restaurant.

It worked. She became quieter the moment they were in the open air. She leaned against a building, no longer crying, and shook her shoulders in a steadily-diminishing crescendo. Finally, she quieted down completely, and turned groggily to him, her face looking as

if it had been rubbed determinedly in an artist's palette.

"I'm s-sorry," she said. "I'm t-terribly s-sorry. I haven't done that for years. But you see, Mr. Balik—I haven't talked about myself for years."

"There's a nice bar at the corner," he pointed out, tremendously relieved. He had feared she had made up her mind to drive him to some drastic act of desperation by crying all day! "Let's pop in, and I'll have a drink. You can use the lady's room to fix yourself up."

He took her arm and steered her into the place. Then he climbed onto a bar stool and had himself a double brandy.

What an experience! And what a remarkably strange girl!

Of course, he shouldn't have pressed her quite so hard on a subject about which she was evidently so sensitive. Was that his fault, though—that she *was* so sensitive?

Fabian considered the matter carefully, judicially, and decided that he was blaming himself needlessly. No, it definitely wasn't his fault.

But what a story! The foundling statement, the appendix statement, the teeth, the hair on the fingernails and tongue . . . And that last unbelievable assertion about the navel!

He'd have to think it out—maybe get some other opinions. But one thing he was sure of—

Wednesday Gresham hadn't been lying in any particular. Wednesday Gresham was just not the sort of a girl who made up tall stories about herself.

When she rejoined him, he urged her to have a drink. "It will help you get a grip on yourself."

She demurred, protesting that she didn't drink very much. But he insisted, and finally she gave in. "Just a liqueur—anything. You order it, Mr. Balik."

Fabian was secretly very pleased at her docility. No reprimanding, no back-biting, such as most other girls indulged in. Although what in the world could she have reprimanded him for, come to think of it.

"You still look a little frayed," he told her. "When we get back, don't bother going to your desk. Go right in to Mr. Osborne and finish taking dictation. There's no point in giving the other girls something to talk about. I'll sign in for you."

She inclined her head submissively and continued to sip from the tiny glass.

"What was that last comment you made in the restaurant," he asked. "I'm sure you won't mind discussing it, now. I mean—about not being born, but being made? That was an odd thing to say."

Wednesday sighed. "It isn't my own idea. It's Dr. Lorington's. Years ago, when he was examining me, he said that I looked as if I'd been made—by an amateur. By

someone who didn't have all the blueprints, or didn't understand them, or wasn't concentrating hard enough."

"I see." He stared at her, absolutely intrigued. She looked normal enough. Better than normal, in fact. And yet—

LATER THAT afternoon, he telephoned Jim Rudd and made an appointment for right after work. Jim Rudd had been his roommate in college and was now a doctor. Whatever his shortcomings, a practicing physician should be able to give him some advice that would be at least professional, and carry the weight of authority.

But Jim Rudd wasn't able to help him very much. He listened patiently to Fabian's story and at the end of it leaned back in his chair and pursed his lips at the diploma hanging neatly framed on the wall facing him.

"You sure do go in for the unusual, Fabe. For a superficially well-adjusted, well-organized guy with a real talent for the mundane things of life, you pick the damn'dest women I ever heard of. But that's your business. Maybe it's your way of adding a necessary pinch of the exotic to the grim daily round. Or maybe you're making up for the drabness of your father's grocery store."

"This girl isn't a weirdie," Fabian insisted angrily. "She's a very simple little secretary, prettier than most—but that's about all."

"Have it your own way. To me, she's a real weirdie. To me, there's not a hell of a lot of difference—from your description—between her and that crazy White Russian dame you were running around with back in our junior year. You know the one I mean—what was her name?"

"Sandra? Oh, Jim, what's the matter with you? Sandra was a bollixed-up box of dynamite who was always blowing up in my face. This kid turns pale and dies if I so much as raise my voice. Besides, I had a real puppy-love crush on Sandra. Miss Gresham is somebody I just met, and I don't feel anything for her, one way or the other."

The young doctor grinned. "So you come up to my office and have a consultation about her! Well, it's your funeral. What do you want to know?"

"What causes all these—these physical peculiarities?"

Dr. Rudd got up and sat on the edge of his desk. "First," he said, "whether you want to recognize it or not, she's a highly disturbed person. The hysterics in the restaurant point to it, and the fantastic nonsense she told you about her body does too. So right there, you have something. If only one percent of what she told you is true—and even that I would say is pretty high—it makes sense in terms of psychosomatic imbalance. Medicine doesn't yet know quite how it works, but one thing seems certain.

Anyone badly mixed up mentally is going to be at least a little mixed up physically, too."

Fabian thought about that for a while. "Jim, you don't know what it means to those little secretaries in the pool to tell lies to the office manager! A fib or two, about why they were absent the day before, yes. But not stories such as she told—not to *me*."

Rudd shrugged. "I don't know what you look like to them. I don't work for you, Fabe. But none of what you say would hold true for a psycho. And a psycho is what I have to consider her. Look, some of that stuff she told you is possible. Some of it has even occurred in medical literature. There have been well-authenticated cases of people, for example, who have grown several sets of teeth in their lifetime. These are biological sports, one-in-a-million individuals. Okay. But the rest of it? All the rest of it happening to one person? *Please*."

"I saw some of it," Fabian protested. "I saw the hairs on her fingernails."

"You saw *something* on her fingernails. It could be any one of a dozen different possibilities. I'm sure of one thing. It *wasn't* hair. Right there she gave herself away. Dammit, man, hair and nails are the same organs, essentially. One doesn't grow on the other!"

"And the navel? The missing navel?"

Jim Rudd dropped to his feet

and strode rapidly about the office. "I wish I knew why I'm wasting so much time with you," he complained. "A human being without a navel is as possible as an insect with a body temperature of ninety-eight degrees. It just can't be. It's unheard of in medical literature."

He seemed to get more and more upset as he considered it. He kept shaking his head negatively as he paced.

"Suppose I brought her to your office," said Fabian. "And suppose you examined her and found no navel. Now just consider that for a moment. What would you say then?"

"I'd say plastic surgery," the doctor said instantly. "Mind you, I'm positive she'd never submit to such an examination, but if she did, and there were no navel, plastic surgery would be the only answer."

"Why would anyone want to do plastic surgery on a navel?"

"I don't know. I haven't the vaguest idea. Maybe she was in a serious accident. Maybe she had a disfiguring birthmark in that place. But there will be scars, let me tell you. *She had to be born with a navel*."

Fabian got up too. He was feeling very excited. "And if she hadn't been born? The usual way, I mean?"

"What other way is there? Hatching out of an egg?"

"She could have been made," Fabian suggested. "Just as she says

—by an amateur. An amateur who, in addition to all his other errors, forgot to put in a navel."

Rudd went back to his desk. He picked up a prescription pad. "Let me give you the name of a good psychiatrist, Fabe. I've thought ever since that Sandra business that you've had some personal problems that might get out of hand one day. This man is one of the finest—"

Fabian left. He went into a phone booth and called Wednesday and made a date with her for Saturday night . . .

She was so obviously in a flutter when he picked her up that night—so much more of a flutter than a-date-with-the-boss would account for—that Fabian was puzzled. But he waited and gave her an ostentatious and expensive good time. Afterwards, after dinner and after the theater, when they were sitting in the corner of a small night club over their drinks, he asked her about it.

"You don't date much, do you, Wednesday?"

"No, I don't, Mr. Balik—I mean, Fabian," she said, smiling shyly as she remembered the first-name privilege she had been accorded for the evening. "I usually just go out with girl friends, not with men. I usually turn down dates."

"Why? You're not going to find a husband that way. You want to get married, don't you?"

Wednesday shook her head slow-

ly. "I don't think so. I—I'm afraid to. Not of marriage. Of babies. I don't think a person like me ought to have a baby."

"Nonsense! Is there any scientific reason why you shouldn't?"

"I'm afraid it might be—I think with my body being as—as funny as it is, I shouldn't take chances with a child. Dr. Lorington thinks so too. Besides, there's the poem."

Fabian put down his drink. "Poem? What poem?"

"You know, the one about the days of the week, I learned it when I was a little girl, and it frightened me even then. It goes:

*Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of
woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child is loving and
giving—*

And so on. When I was a little girl in the orphanage, I used to say to myself, 'I'm Wednesday. I'm different from all other little girls in all kinds of strange ways. And my child—'

"Who gave you that name?"

"I was left at the foundling home just after New Year's Eve—Wednesday morning. So they did not know what else to call me, especially when they found I didn't have a navel. And then, as I told you, after the Greshams adopted me, I took their last name."

He reached for her hand and grasped it firmly with both of his. He noted with triumphant pleasure

that the fingernails *were* hairy. "You're a very pretty girl, Wednesday Gresham."

When she saw that he meant it, she blushed and looked down at the table-cloth.

"And you really don't have a navel?"

"No, I don't. Really."

"What else about you is different?" Fabian asked. "I mean, besides the things you told me."

"Well," she considered. "There's that business about my blood pressure."

"Tell me about it," he urged.

She told him.

Two dates later, she informed Fabian that Dr. Lorington wanted to see him—alone. He went all the way uptown to the old-fashioned brownstone, hardly able to control his excitement. He had so many questions to ask!

Dr. Lorington was a tall, aged man with pale skin and absolutely white hair. He moved very slowly as he gestured his visitor to a chair, but his eyes never left Fabian's face.

"Wednesday tells me you've been seeing a good deal of her, Mr. Balik. May I ask why?"

Fabian said, hesitantly, "I—I like her very much. I'm interested in her."

"Interested. Just how do you wish me to construe that? Clinically—as a specimen?"

"What a way to put it, Doctor! She's a pretty girl, she's a nice girl. Why should I be interested in her as a specimen?"

The doctor stroked his chin, still watching Fabian very closely. "She's a pretty girl," he agreed, "but there are many pretty girls. You're a young man obviously on his way up in the world, and you're also obviously far out of Wednesday's class. From what she's told me—and mind you, it's been all on the positive side—I've gotten a definite impression that you look on her as a specimen, but a specimen, let us say, about which you feel a substantial collector's urge.

"Why you should feel this way, I don't know enough about you to say. But no matter how she rhapsodizes about you, I continue to feel strongly that you have no conventional, expected emotional interest in her. And now that I've seen you, I'm positive that I am right."

"Glad to hear she rhapsodizes about me," Fabian tried to squeeze out a bashful-type grin. "You have nothing to worry about, Doctor."

"I think there's quite a bit to worry about," the doctor said. "Frankly, Mr. Balik, your appearance has confirmed my previous impressions. I am quite certain I don't like you. Furthermore, I don't like you for Wednesday."

Fabian thought that over for a moment, then shrugged. "That's too bad. But I don't think she'll listen to you. She's gone without male companionship too long, and she's too flattered by my going after her."

"I'm terribly afraid you're right. Listen to me, Mr. Balik. I'm very

fond of Wednesday and I know how unguarded she is. I ask you, almost as a father, to leave her alone. I've taken care of her since she arrived at the foundling home. I was responsible for keeping her case out of the medical journals so that she might have some chance for a normal life. At the moment, I'm retired from practice. Wednesday Gresham is my only regular patient. Couldn't you find it in your heart to be kind and have nothing more to do with her?"

"What's this about her being made, not born?" Fabian countered. "She says it was your idea."

The old man sighed and shook his head over his desk-top for a long moment. "It's the only explanation that makes sense," he said at last, dispiritedly. "Considering the somatic inaccuracies and ambivalences."

Fabian clasped his hands and rubbed his elbows thoughtfully on the arms of his chair. "Did you ever think there might be another explanation? She might be a mutant, a new kind of human evolution, or the offspring of creatures from another world, say, who happened to be stranded on this planet?"

"Highly unlikely," Dr. Lorington said. "None of these physical modifications are especially useful in any conceivable environment, with the possible exception of the constantly renewing teeth. Nor are the modifications fatal. They tend to be just—inconvenient. As a

physician who has examined many human beings in my life, I would say that Wednesday is thoroughly, indisputably human. She is just a little—well, the word is *amateurish*."

The doctor sat up straight. "There is something else, Mr. Balik. I think it extremely inadvisable for people like Wednesday to have children of their own."

Fabian's eyes lit up in fascination. "Why? What would the children be like?"

"They might be like anything imaginable — or unimaginable. With so much disarrangement of the normal physical system, the modification in the reproductive functions must be enormous too. That's why I ask you, Mr. Balik, not to go on seeing Wednesday, not to go on stimulating her to thoughts of marriage. Because this is one girl that I am certain should not have babies!"

"We'll see." Fabian rose and offered his hand. "Thank you very much for your time and trouble, Doctor."

Dr. Lorington cocked his head and stared up at him. Then, without shaking the hand, he said in a quiet, even voice. "You are welcome. Goodbye, Mr. Balik."

WEDNESDAY was naturally miserable over the antagonism between the two men. But there was very little doubt where her loyalties would lie in a crisis. All those years of determined emotional starvation

had resulted in a frantic voracity. Once she allowed herself to think of Fabian romantically, she was done for. She told him that she did her work at the office—from which their developing affair had so far been successfully screened—in a daze at the thought that *he* liked *her*.

Fabian found her homage delicious. Most women he had known began to treat him with a gradually sharpening edge of contempt as time went on. Wednesday became daily more admiring, more agreeable, more compliant.

True, she was by no means brilliant, but she was, he told himself, extremely pretty, and, therefore, quite presentable. Just to be on the safe side, he found an opportunity to confer with Mr. Slaughter, the senior partner of the firm, ostensibly on personnel matters. He mentioned in passing that he was slightly interested in one of the girls in the secretarial pool. Would there be any high-echelon objection to that?

"Interested to the extent of perhaps marrying the girl?" Mr. Slaughter asked, studying him from under a pair of enormously thick eyebrows.

"Possibly. It might very well come to that, sir. If you have no ob—"

"No objection at all, my boy, no objection at all! I don't like executives flim-flamming around with their file-clerks as a general rule, but if it's handled quietly and ends

in matrimony, it could be an excellent thing for the office. I'd like to see you married, and steadied down. It might give the other single people in the place some sensible ideas for a change. But mind you, Balik, no flim-flam. No hanky-panky, especially on office time!"

Satisfied, Fabian now devoted himself to separating Wednesday from Dr. Lorington. He pointed out to her that the old man couldn't live much longer and she needed a regular doctor who was young enough to be able to help her with the physical complexities she faced for the rest of her life. A young doctor like Jim Rudd, for example.

Wednesday wept, but was completely incapable of fighting him for long. In the end, she made only one condition—that Dr. Rudd preserve the secrecy that Lorington had initiated. She didn't want to become a medical journal freak or a newspaper sob story.

The reasons why Fabian agreed had only a little to do with magnanimity. He wanted to have her oddities for himself alone. Sandra he had worn on his breast, like a flashing jewel hung from a pendant. Wednesday he would keep in a tiny chamois bag, examining her from time to time in a self-satisfied, miserly fashion.

And, after a while, he might have another, smaller jewel . . .

Jim Rudd accepted his conditions. And was astounded.

"There is no navel at all!" he

ejaculated when he had rejoined Fabian in his study, after the first examination. "I've palpated the skin for scar tissue, but there's not the slightest hint of it. And that's not the half of it! She has no discernible systole and diastole. Man, do you know what that means?"

"I'm not interested right now," Fabian told him. "Later, maybe. Do you think you can help her with these physical problems when they come up?"

"Oh, sure. At least as well as that old fellow."

"What about children? Can she have them?"

Rudd spread his hands. "I don't see why not. For all her peculiarities, she's a remarkably healthy young woman. And we have no reason to believe that this condition—whatever you want to call it—is hereditary. Of course, some part of it might be, in some strange way or other, but on the evidence . . ."

They were married, just before the start of Fabian's vacation, at City Hall. They came back to the office after lunch and told everyone about it. Fabian had already hired a new secretary to replace his wife.

Two months later, Fabian had managed to get her pregnant.

He was amazed at how upset she became, considering the meekness he had induced in her from the beginning of their marriage. He tried to be stern and to tell her he would have none of this nonsense, Dr. Rudd had said there was every reason to expect that she would

have a normal baby, and that was that. But it didn't work. He tried gentle humor, cajolery. He even took her in his arms and told her he loved her too much not to want to have a little girl just like her. But that didn't work either.

"Fabian, darling," she moaned, "don't you understand? I'm not supposed to have a child. I'm not like other women."

He finally used something he had been saving as a last resort for this emergency. He took a book from the shelf and flipped it open. "I understand," he said. "It's half Dr. Lorington and his nineteenth-century superstitious twaddle, and half a silly little folk poem you read when you were a girl and that made a terrifying impression on you. Well, I can't do anything about Dr. Lorington at this point in your life, but I can do something about that poem. Here. Read this."

She read:

"Birthdays

by B. L. FARJEON

*Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is loving
and giving,
Thursday's child works hard
for a living,
Friday's child is full of woe,
Saturday's child has far to go,
But the child that is born on
the Sabbath-day
Is brave and bonny, and good
and gay."*

Wednesday looked up and shook the tears from her eyes. "But I don't understand," she muttered in confusion. "That's not like the one I read."

He squatted beside her and explained patiently. "The one you read had two lines transposed, right? Wednesday's and Thursday's child had the lines that Friday's and Saturday's child have in this version and vice versa. Well, it's an old Devonshire poem originally, and no one knows for sure which version is right. I looked it up, especially for you. I just wanted to show you how silly you were, basing your entire attitude toward life on a couple of verses which could be read either way, not to mention the fact that they were written several centuries before anyone thought of naming you Wednesday."

She threw her arms around him and held on tightly. "Oh, Fabian, darling! Don't be angry with me. It's just that I'm so—*frightened!*"

JIM RUDD was a little concerned, too. "Oh, I'm pretty sure it will be all right, but I wish you'd waited until I had time to familiarize myself a bit more with the patient. The only thing, Fabe, I'll have to call in a first-rate obstetrician. I'd never dream of handling this myself. I can make him keep it quiet, about Wednesday and all that. But the moment she enters the delivery room, all bets are off. Too many odd things about her—they're

bound to be noticed by some nurse, at least."

"Do the best you can," Fabian told him. "I don't want my wife involved in garish publicity, if it can be helped. But if it can't be—well, it's about time Wednesday learned to live in the real world."

The gestation period went along pretty well, with not much more than fairly usual complications. The obstetrical specialist Jim Rudd had suggested was as intrigued as anyone else by Wednesday's oddities, but he told them that the pregnancy was following a monotonously normal course and that the foetus seemed to be developing satisfactorily and completely on schedule.

Wednesday became fairly cheerful again. Outside of her minor fears, Fabian reflected, she was an eminently satisfactory and useful wife. She didn't exactly shine at parties where they mingled with other married couples from Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby, but she never committed a major faux pas either. She was, in fact, rather well liked, and, as she obeyed him faithfully in every particular, he had no cause at all for complaint.

He spent his days at the office handling the dry, minuscule details of paper work and personnel administration more efficiently than ever before, and his nights and week-ends with a person he had every reason to believe was the most *different* woman on the face

of the Earth. He was very well satisfied.

Near the end of her term, Wednesday did beg for permission to visit Dr. Lorington just once. Fabian had to refuse, regretfully but firmly.

"It's not that I mind his not sending us a congratulatory telegram or wedding gift, Wednesday. I really don't mind that at all. I'm not the kind of man to hold a grudge. But you're in good shape now. You're over most of your silly fears. Lorington would just make them come alive again."

And she continued to do what he said. Without argument, without complaint. She was really quite a good wife. Fabian looked forward to the baby eagerly.

One day, he received a telephone call at the office from the hospital. Wednesday had gone into labor while visiting the obstetrician. She'd been rushed to the hospital and given birth shortly after arrival to a baby girl. Both mother and child were doing well.

Fabian broke out the box of cigars he'd been saving for this occasion. He passed them around the office and received the felicitations of everybody up to and including Mr. Slaughter, Mr. Stark and both Mr. Slingsbys. Then he took off for the hospital.

From the moment he arrived in the Maternity Pavilion, he knew that something was wrong. It was the way people looked at him, then looked quickly away. He heard a

nurse saying behind him: "That must be the father." His lips went tight and dry.

They took him in to see his wife. Wednesday lay on her side, her knees drawn up against her abdomen. She was breathing hard, but seemed to be unconscious. Something about her position made him feel acutely uncomfortable, but he couldn't decide exactly what it was.

"I thought this was going to be the natural childbirth method," he said. "She told me she didn't think you'd have to use anesthesia."

"We didn't use anesthesia," the obstetrician told him. "Now let's go to your child, Mr. Balik."

He let them fit a mask across his face and lead him to the glass-enclosed room where the new-born infants lay in their tiny beds. He moved slowly, unwillingly, a shrieking song of incomprehensible disaster building up slowly in his head.

A nurse picked a baby out of a bed that was off in a corner away from the others. As Fabian stumbled closer, he observed with a mad surge of relief that the child looked normal. There was no visible blemish or deformity. Wednesday's daughter would not be a freak.

But the infant stretched its arms out to him. "Oh, Fabian, darling," it lisped through toothless gums in a voice that was all too terrifyingly familiar. "Oh, Fabian, darling, the strangest, most unbelievable thing has happened!"

the last quarry

by . . . Bryce Walton

The Servitor's zombielike eyes mirrored man's deepest yearnings. By what miracle had human science sired creatures so monstrous?

THE SKY was the color of mercury, and thick snow fell out of it, heavily as though it would never stop.

Hall had been sitting at the window for almost two hours looking at the snow, as if fascinated by the way it seemed to dissolve everything into a peaceful and white anonymity. He sat heavily, hunched over in the gray light watching the snow, and watching the figures walking along the street.

Almost all of them were walking by twos—hurrying somewhere together. And the ones who were alone were hurrying in a way that said they wouldn't be alone long.

Hall, a big man, sat heavily as though he would be alone forever. So absorbed was he in the white world beyond the windowpane that the phone rang five times before he realized it.

He scooped up the receiver, a look of embittered weariness seeming to add years to his age.

Yes, indeed he was getting tired of the hunt.

"Hall, I've got to see you at once!" said a woman's voice at the other end of the wire.

We've always believed that when the last man stands alone and defiant beneath the dwindling radiance of a dying sun he will still find a way to ward off disaster—precisely as Bryce Walton has boldly enabled his predecessors to do with such triumphant logic. Do you remember Mr. Walton's earlier, astounding story of a twenty-first century Jack the Giant Killer? Well, there are slayers far more insidiously terrifying to combat here, each as deadly as a basilisk.

"All right, Donna," Hall replied. "Are you at home?"

The woman's voice was ragged, and anyway Hall had known he was nearing the end of the hunt. His hands tingled, and some of the old excitement came back...

"Did you get to see Martin?"

"Yes, yes. Just a glimpse of him. But God—that was enough."

"And—the servant?" Hall asked quietly.

"He wouldn't let me stay. He's sharper than any of the others. He knew I wasn't a public stenographer as soon as he saw me. But I managed to catch a glimpse of Martin through the library door. An accident . . . the door came open a little. Then our little public enemy number nine hundred and ninety-nine told me to get out!"

"So it could follow you, of course," said Hall. "I guess Martin looks pretty bad by now."

"Horrible. So fat—like a huge white toad in a wheelchair. It was unbelievable. He was staring at me, but he didn't seem to see me at all."

"I'll be right over, Donna," Hall said. "Be sure it's me outside your door. Check the identification. We're the only two who should know about your apartment. If anyone else tries to get in, kill them."

Hall replaced the receiver. He turned slowly toward the door. They hadn't wasted any time. One of them was in the hallway.

No. 999 had gone much farther than most of the others. Using hu-

man beings to do its legwork. But human beings were comparatively easy to handle.

Hall stood in the middle of the dim room and gave it a last survey, knowing he would never see it again.

My room, he thought. My headquarters for five years.

It was a dingy mouldy three-floor walkup in a section of the city that had been condemned and would soon be destroyed and replaced by glass and chrome and neat little flower gardens.

Just a gray room with a worn carpet, a single narrow bed, a flowered vase lampbase with a dusty shade. A room with nothing distinctive about it to identify it as belonging to Hall, either under that name or any of the other names he used at various times. No books, no magazines—nothing really individualistic.

Except for the topcoat over the chair there weren't even any clothes in the closet. Hall had only one suit and he was wearing it, as he had worn it continuously for five years. He stood there as though he were about to rent the room, or had only just moved in.

Hall moved silently to the door. The vague sound came again and he evaluated the sound with the trained attunement of his unique training. To others it would have been a sound thoroughly non-suspect in its resemblance to a whisper of wind, or the rustling of torn wallpaper, or even a rat.

Hall could picture the fool standing out there. Some cheap thug, no doubt, who had no idea who had hired him, or what he was really involved in. Some habitual criminal type whom no amount of arrests and treatment had been able to change. And now he wanted to die.

Hall could even tell exactly where the fool was standing, hunched over slightly, listening with his every nerve alert.

Hall stepped forward and jerked the door open. The man was still trying to drag a small revolver up. With an oath Hall grabbed his wrist and swung him around and pressed his fingers into a yielding throat.

The miserable wretch made no sound. He struggled in nervous spasmodic movements like a fish. When he stopped struggling any way at all, Hall put him on the bed and then went out into the hallway.

He didn't know if the man were dead or not. By the time Hall reached the window and the fire escape he had forgotten all about him. Hall's efficiency depended, among many things, on dismissing unimportant incidents from his mind.

He had hunted down and destroyed but two less than a thousand of them, and there was only one left who could be thought of as dangerous. So far it was a perfect record, and Hall intended to finish the job before dawn.

He was no longer tired. He didn't feel that frightening loneliness any more either. He felt nothing now except the finely-tuned machinery of the hunter working, a kind of high but careful excitement.

Two figures stood across the street under the white-crustured trees. He was sure that two more were stationed just at the foot of the third-floor stairwell waiting for a signal from the man who wasn't going to give them any signal.

It would be easier to go down the fire escape—and faster. He knew that he had to move fast, very fast. There was a chance that he hadn't learned the identity of No. 999 soon enough to stop him from using vital information he had certainly been squeezing out of Martin. The other Servitors had fixed themselves to some high and important people. But No. 999 had really hit high.

Ben Martin had been the Administrator of the Secret Government Research Center in Virginia for ten years. A month ago he had retired in the face of loud protest—giving illness as an excuse—and a week after that his wife had died of a heart attack.

But even that wouldn't have aroused any suspicions. It was a word about a servant Martin had recently hired—and a word from his wife before she died—which had given Hall the clue he needed, and started him on his last hunt.

Martin's wife had hired what

she thought was a servant. She could scarcely have been blamed for not knowing that the servant she had engaged in good faith was not a human being, but a Servitor. Neither could she have known that a Servitor was an artificial creation no one could distinguish from a human being except by its destructive influence. And the victim was not in a position to make any such distinctions.

No. 999 had wormed plenty of dangerous information out of Martin. What it intended doing with the information wasn't Hall's concern. No. 999 would use it to gain power, of course. He might try to get out of the country with the information and use it against the United States with the backing of some antagonistic nation. No. 999 might even be planning to blast loose at the living breathing humanity which had created it and which it hated with such unhuman virulence.

One thing was certain: No. 999 was far more intelligent than any of the others had been. It had avoided detection for five years where the others had failed. It had benefited from its predecessor's mistakes. It knew a lot more than it had known five years ago, and it had been built to be highly intelligent to start with.

Hall's only concern was to kill it.

He went to the window, jerked it up and went through, under the guard rail and down the stairwell

in the fire-escape platform. The rust and cold iron tore at him, but he didn't feel it. His hands broke the fall, and then he dropped on down, with bullets chipping around him at the metal.

He ran for three blocks in the gray evening that was fast turning charcoal, and the lights blinking on in the few poor scattered shops hardly seemed like light at all.

He ran into the alley. Wind bit at his cheeks and kicked at his hair, and pushed the smell of the sky like a fading hope into his breathing.

Iceicles hung from the lip of the garbage can and a half-dead cat huddled against the brick wall. The animal didn't even snarl as Hall moved beside it against the wall. The thickening shadows were blue now like the shadows of all his hunting years. Except that this particular year seemed older as Hall waited, as though it had suddenly grown incredibly ancient in a month.

He knew he would never hunt again, so he thought of Donna as he waited. She at least would go on living and hunting. Like so many others, she had started to love him, never once suspecting that he couldn't love her in return. Her cross was her excessive need for an unreal love. That kind of abnormally centered hunger was dangerous. It was the big human weakness . . .

He heard the pursuer who had stayed close behind him and ahead

of the others, coming on stolidly. It was not even moving with the aliveness of uncertainty down the white funnel of the night. It was no more than a dumb clod carrying out orders against humanity—the orders of something that had never been human.

There he was, in the alley's mouth. He flinched suddenly, and crouched like some kind of animal, realizing that he was standing vulnerable, wide open to attack.

He started to cry out as Hall swung the heavy soggy weight of the garbage can into his stomach. It struck him and he fell with a groan to his knees, fumbling stupidly in his topcoat pocket for a gun.

Hall used his fist, very sharply, and only twice. He employed the simplest means and worked silently so as to avoid the red tape of apprehension, and all the pretensions of being something else that slowed up his work.

Snow fell on the man's upturned face, melting on his wide, big-pupiled eyes. Swiftly Hall ran to the other end of the alley and then over to Seventh Avenue and ducked into a drugstore to call Schor, the Security Chief.

A few of the others had hired humans to stooge for them, but only a few. No. 999 was less prejudiced than the others of his kind. The stooges never knew of course.

No one knew that a thousand Servitors, experimental models, had

been built by the Dalsan Company six years before. No one knew that they had disappeared of their own volition, and that due to some unforeseeable miscalculation, they had been not only as intelligent as most humans, but had possessed a degree of free will, and a consuming hatred for humans.

The Security Department had decided it would be better if people didn't know. And that it would also be a good idea if people never found out.

In fact, only three individuals knew now. Allen Schor the Security Chief, Donna Connell a top operative—and Hall. The scientists who had designed and built the Servitors for the Dalsan Company had known, of course. But they had committed suicide.

"Hello, Schor," Hall said on the telephone. "I'm on my way to Martin's. I know it's got him. I'm dropping by to see if Donna's all right. Then I'm heading straight for Martin's."

There was a long pause. Then Schor said: "Let us stand by this time."

"That wouldn't do any good," Hall told him.

"It might," Schor persisted. "This one's the worst. I don't want anything—"

"—to happen to me?" Hall smiled. "I'm afraid you're getting sentimental in your old age."

"Just give me the word to stand by," Schor pleaded.

"You'd only get yourself killed.

You wouldn't stand a chance. You've always wanted to stand by, but you know damn well if I can't swing it, then you couldn't do a thing—except die."

"Well—be careful," Schor warned. "For God's sake, Hall, be careful. This is the last one. If something happened to you now, after we've gotten clear through to the last one—"

"It's too late to worry," Hall said. "Oh . . . and tell your wife I really enjoyed our long talk the other night about Plato. Tell her I still don't agree with her that he was anything but a detriment to history, but that it was a very pleasant evening."

"Yes, yes—all right. I'll tell her."

"Good-bye!"

HALL stared at the door. Donna wasn't there to greet him.

He knew that she had been in the apartment only a few minutes before. But she wasn't anywhere in the three-room hideaway now. He knew as well that no one had arrived before him to spirit her away.

She had gone because a part of her over which she had no control had forced her to go. Back to Martin's—and the Servitor. She had looked too long and too deeply at No. 999, and now she was gone.

The power of the Servitors resided solely in the weakness of the human beings who looked at them, and were looked at in return. And

no one was immune, Hall remembered with horror as he ran back down the stairs to get a cab to take him to the airport. No one—not even Donna.

She had resisted all the others, with Hall's constant support. But No. 999 had looked too deeply. And Donna was just a little too hungry for love. True, there was no better operative than Donna. But she was human and—she believed in magic. Unfortunately a belief in magic was common among primitive tribes, and universal among children, and it lingered on in every civilized human being. Every modern man and woman had some one deep desire, stronger than all the others, and that desire was fortified by the feeling that if this one big urge could be satisfied, they would then be free of anxiety—made whole, and utterly happy. It was a reaching out for some kind of Nirvana.

Donna covered up her deep unconscious loneliness well enough. She was pretty enough. But unconsciously she believed in the magic of a great love that would cure everything. And the trouble with the Servitors was that when they looked at you, you became convinced that they could give you the one thing you wanted most on earth.

They could too. But what a human wanted most, he could die from having. He could die because what a human wanted most was a pathological need. No matter what

it was—if he could get all he wanted of it—it killed him.

Hall thought of Martin turning from a gaunt man into what Donna had described as a huge white toad. As soon as he had suspected that No. 999 was Martin's servant, he had investigated Martin's background. No. 999 had simply been giving Martin what his neurotic self had always wanted most.

And that was precisely what Donna had gone back to get from No. 999.

As the helioplane lifted and moved off through the snow sea of the sky, Hall remembered the room he had left, the hidden apartment of Donna's which neither he nor she would ever see again.

Once . . . once she had been waiting there for him. They had worked together for years but Hall had never suspected how Donna was beginning to feel about him. It was a better kind of irony that he could think about it now.

The invitation to dinner—the candle light—the red Chianti wine . . . That never-to-be-forgotten night with Donna was something that could only happen once with Hall, but then—it hadn't happened. It might have but it hadn't. Which was all that Hall could have expected, of course. It was strange that he couldn't quite rub out the way he had expected more . . .

He could remember the smell of her perfume, the intimate tones of her voice calling softly to him in

his loneliness. He could remember how her dark eyes seemed to come closer and ever closer, and her warm hands on his face . . .

He could feel her touch again now—the subdued flickering inside him like an uneasy flame. The fire that could smoulder but never leap high.

There was a pain in his throat, and like a flashlight into his dark misery he saw her figure as he had seen it so many times before.

That was his weakness.

But he had conquered it.

He took another cab from the village toward Martin's country estate. Along a narrow road already carpeted with snow it sped, and the entire world seemed covered, and silent in the night. The only sound was the hissing of flakes that seemed to be falling clear across the land. They descended slow and sullen in a kind of quiet that seemed as endless as the sky.

"No, don't wait," Hall said to the driver as the red tail light blinked out.

He left the cab at a turn in the road about half a mile from Martin's house, and started walking through the snow toward its squares of yellow light. He knew Martin very well from an intricate study of his life. The man had been one of the top research physicists, and yet he had never really grown up. His wife had taken care of him for years, babied him. It was inevitable that Martin should never have really learned to take

care of himself. Unconsciously, therefore, he had always wanted above everything else for someone to take care of him.

That was Martin's weakness.

Martin's wife had evidently needed help because of Martin's demands, so she had hired a personal servant—No. 999. The Servitor had killed her. Then, without regret or remorse, it had taken over completely the job of fulfilling Martin's needs. And it had managed the task far more effectively than Mrs. Martin could have done.

Martin probably didn't even bother feeding himself any more—just sat day after day in his wheelchair growing fatter and fatter. Being completely taken care of the way he had always wanted and stripped of all of his worries. No more headaches, no more terrible responsibilities. No more decisions involving cobalt bombs or sprays of germs, or something even more hideous to contemplate.

No. 999 would take care of everything.

And Donna?

No. 999 had promised Donna love. She hadn't been conscious of it, but the promise itself was what she had *really* been afraid of when she had called Hall earlier, with such terror in her voice.

Of being taken over, of being given what she wanted until she wouldn't want anything else again, wouldn't even want to live again . . .

Hall dropped flat on his stomach and crawled toward the porch, his senses scanning the area. He waited for long minutes, but could detect nothing. He was almost certain that No. 999 wouldn't be ready. How could the Servitor have any way of knowing that a lucky chain of circumstances had enabled him to act almost immediately.

Hall lay tight against the base of the porch, with its rocks and ice-crusting mortar. Every danger-charged minute seemed only a kind of re-living, for the hunt was no longer anything new. Slowly he raised himself on his elbows and looked through the French windows.

Donna was lying on a couch before the burning fireplace. She might have been dead. Her arms were hanging down on both sides of the couch, and she was staring at the ceiling. In her eyes there was an expectant joy too great to describe or understand. Like a wraith stretched out in a coffin she seemed, waiting for the joys of Heaven.

He remembered again the night when she had offered him everything—far more than she was offering him now. Then at least there had been something full and genuine in her feelings about him. He felt sad, tragically sad, and somehow responsible for her defeat.

He desensitized himself so he would feel no disconcerting pain, and then he resolutely heaved himself over the porch railing, and

without pausing to draw breath hurled himself through the glass of the French windows.

But the element of shocking surprise wasn't enough. For an instant Hall saw the lean deadly form through a glittering spray of splintering wood and slivers of glass, and rolled desperately to seek cover behind a chair.

The three explosions rang deafeningly in his ears, and the impact of the slugs seemed to drive him into the gray rug of the floor. If No. 999 had been clasp ing a circuit gun Hall would no longer be alive.

Desensitized, he felt nothing except the bitter black gall of possible failure. His shattered leg wouldn't function. He hitched himself around, and as he did so a wheelchair came out of a door to the right of the blazing fireplace. Martin was covered with an Indian blanket. He was a huge mound of unrecognizable suet.

No one could have remembered at that moment that the figure had ever been Martin. Hall heard a frightful voice, a grotesque wheezing sigh of babyish irritation. But nothing moved behind the sound except the pink rosebud lips, and even they moved with a heavy torpor.

"Richard . . . who is it? What is happening here?"

The puffed marshmallow face, the eyes like those of a grazing animal faded as Hall twisted on around, moving the circuit gun. The voice, the image of Martin,

had all filled up no more than a second's space of time.

So *it* was called Richard now! It was moving along the wall as though in some strange fashion it had moved out of the wall itself. Immaculate, lean and trim in a black suit, with its white face destitute of any emotion that Hall could see. Yet how odd that that face had been so effective in reflecting the deepest, most despairing needs of human beings. It was an evil kind of mirror.

It fired again. Hall slid forward, feeling his body throb. He saw the hole appear in his coat sleeve. His fingers spread out uselessly and the circuit gun slipped away from him . . .

Hall felt the leg of the heavy table against his other hand. Richard smiled down and aimed the revolver relentlessly at Hall's head. Only it wasn't really a smile at all.

"So you're not a man," *it* said.

"No," Hall replied, in a defiant whisper.

"You've done a good job of concealing the fact."

Hall didn't move. "I threw up a different oscillation, so you would think I was human," he said. "It made you just careless enough to make the difference. You and the others."

"What difference? You die. You're not like the rest of us, though."

"Not exactly," Hall said. "I was number one thousand, only my

motivations were different. I was made for only one purpose—to kill you.”

“Then they didn’t do such a good job with you. You must realize that I’m going to kill you.”

“You won’t kill me,” Hall affirmed quietly.

He moved like an explosion. The table crushed the middle of No. 999 into the wall. Hall fired a full charge from the circuit gun into its neck and—into the vital thermostat.

The face of No. 999 became a melting lopsided mask. One of its eyes fell out, and twisted on a wiry strand in the lamplight like a pendant.

No. 999—Richard—was dead.

The end of the road.

No human could have done it. A human had needs that were stronger than his ability to resist a Servitor, even for a minute. And the limitation had included Schor, Donna, every human victim. A human was too vulnerable. But now No. 999 lay on the floor, a pile of synthetic clay. It too had become vulnerable. Hall heard a scream . . .

Martin’s body fell from the wheelchair and lay, a shapeless mound of real clay on the floor, as though released from some overmastering compulsion. Was he dead—or just paralyzed?

It was no concern of Hall’s. His concern had never been with men.

He managed to get up and half fell toward the door. A feeling of uselessness was taking hold of him.

His efficiency was now gravely impaired. He wasn’t even aware that someone was standing just outside the door.

Hall glanced at Donna, still waiting for the love he could never give her. Still waiting for some perfect host to supply the substance of all her childhood dreams of a glorious, all-consuming love . . .

It would be better with a human being, real . . .

Once she had almost made Hall feel human. But that had been a long time ago.

He opened the door.

Schor was standing there, his hands in his topcoat pockets, a little hunched man with an owl’s face and snow on his eyebrows. Behind him was an official Security car, and two Security officers stood at the foot of the porch steps with their guns ready.

Schor held Hall in his arms, and patted his back with a slow, deep affection.

“I came out anyway, Hall,” he said, his voice husky. “Thought you might need me for this last show. I wanted to come.”

I won’t be working with him again, Hall thought. Friendship ended when his task was done.

“If you’d arrived a minute earlier it would have killed you,” Hall said. “It had more power than any fifty of the others.”

Schor essayed an anxious laugh. “Sure, I know. I’m only human.”

“Well—all your worries are over,” Hall said.

"Are the remains taken care of, Hall?"

Hall nodded. "Like the others. A few more minutes and there won't be any trace of him except a charcoal gray suit."

"Convenient," Schor said. "I'm referring, of course, to that built in, self-incinerating device."

"Very," Hall acknowledged.

The Security officers were coming in. Someone was using a phone . . . announcing that Martin was dead. Hall heard Donna moan vaguely and he was glad she was alive.

No. 999 was a melting pile against the wall, fading away.

Hall started limping down the steps.

"Where are you going?" Schor asked quickly. "My wife wants you to—"

"Tell her good-bye," Hall said, abruptly.

Schor's face had a painful ex-

pression. He whispered. "Don't go. It isn't over. Listen. You can keep on working—together with me, Hall. You can hunt men just as well as—"

"No," Hall said. "Only men should hunt men."

When Schor left him, Hall continued to crawl through the snow until he was well away from Martin's house. The snow thickened as he crawled on until he was lost among the dark naked trees by a frozen creek. He could see nothing but a wilderness of falling snow.

He stood there as the snow fell more thickly, covering him over gradually until he blended into the pale silence. Then he pressed the button.

A moment later he was melting slowly away like a snowman reacting to some private sun of its own.

He had been made to do a job, and now it was finished and he . . .

. . . No. 1000.

Just how far will man's daring and technical skill take him when the BIG MOMENT comes—when he decides that Earth is only a footstool for a destiny that must, of necessity, take him to the stars? If you would actually like to stand in the pilot room of a starship beside a captain courageous, to share his trepidation and awe as he breaks open sealed instructions and discovers that life itself may be tossed away at his own discretion we urge you not to miss THE END OF THE JOURNEY by Edmund Cooper in our very next issue. It's a featured novelette by a master of the thrilling moment and the great decision, and the miracle of the best and the worst of men pledged to high accomplishment without thought of self. Equally exciting in a dimension astoundingly different is Sam Merwin's featured companion piece, PASSAGE TO ANYWHERE. Here also a momentous message is broken open, and an organizer of genius is plunged into a swirling tide of world-shaking inventiveness on the frontiers of a tomorrow where the scientists are in full, reckless revolt.

keepers of the house

by . . . Lester del Rey

King could remember how golden and glorious the house had seemed to men—and what the science he hated had done to his friends.

OUTWARDLY, there was nothing about that particular morning to set it apart from the thousands of other such mornings which the dog had smelled. Yet his great, gaunt body shifted nervously on the rocky shelf over the river, and his short hackles lifted slightly as the skin on his neck tautened. He raised his head, sniffing the wind that blew from the land, and his ears searched for wrongness in the sounds that reached him. Once he whined.

The feeling left from the dream was still troubling him. He had bedded down in a dry shelter back from the water. After he had scraped away the ancient, dried bones of rabbits, it had seemed like a good place. But sleep had been too busy, full of running and of tantalizing smells.

And finally, just when he was tearing at something with an almost forgotten flavor, the warm scent in his nostrils had changed to another, and a voice had snapped into his ears. He had jerked awake, shivering, with the name still ringing in his head.

"King!"

So bewildering in scope is the entertainment field that even a well-known writer may find himself deflated by the disconcerting query: "Just what magazines do you write for?" But there is little danger of such a calamity overtaking Lester del Rey, for his contributions to science fantasy have been so numerous and outstanding that the field of his choice would look crater-pitted without them. And this, his newest story, is one of his very best.

The dream memory of Doc had bothered him before, but this time even the warmth of the sun had failed to quiet it, though his nose reported no trace of a human odor now. There was something about this territory . . .

Abruptly, a motion in the water caught his attention. He edged forward, rising to his feet, while his eyes tracked the big fish. Overhead, a bird must have seen the same prey, since it began dropping.

King growled faintly and plunged down into the unpleasant chill of the water. Necessity and decades of near-starvation had taught him perfect form in this unnatural act. A moment later, he was heading for shore with the fish clamped between his jaws.

He found a hollowed spot of dry sand, shook the water out of his short fur, and began tearing at the fish. It was a flavorless breakfast, far inferior to the big salmon that were so easy to catch along the northwestern rivers, but it filled him well enough.

The wind was growing stronger, reminding him of the cold that was creeping down from the north as it seemed to do at regular intervals. Each year, the cold drove him south and the warmth followed to let him move back again.

Usually he took the same trail from river to river, but this time—as in a few other restless years—something had driven him to seek a new way, risking the long runs through the foodless wastelands,

from river to river, looking for some end he never found.

He pawed out a stubborn bone from between his teeth and got to his feet again, the double drive overcoming the wish to rest in the warmth of the sun. Beyond the shelter of the dunes along the river, the wind was sharper and colder, tossing bits of dry sticks and rubble ahead of it.

He had no idea of why he was heading inland, except that it seemed somehow right, until the damp odors on the wind told him that the river must bend in the direction he was heading. By then, he was out of sight of the water and the plants, birds and insects that lived along it. He settled into a steady lope as he came to what had once been a raised roadway. The banked surface was comparatively free of sand, making the going easier.

The road swept past what must have once been heavily-wooded land, and King sniffed the familiar odor of rotted logs. A few trees were still standing, dead and girdled to a height above his head, but there was no life there.

The sand and dust drifted into piles and shifted before the wind, covering and uncovering the ever-present broken rabbit bones, scouring at them and the standing trunks, as if to eliminate even this final evidence that there had been life. In some sections, a few trees and plants had survived and were spreading, but the great dust-bowl

area here was barren. Except for the wind and the padding of King's feet, there was no sound.

Once the road ran among the wrecks of close-packed houses, and King's hackles lifted again, his nose twitching uneasily. It had been twenty years since he had bothered to investigate a house, but this morning his mind kept prickling with strange sensations.

He hesitated at a couple of the rust-crumpled cars; the larger one held crumpled bones that almost meant something to him. Then he left the dead town behind, heading for the strengthening smell of the river.

Ten minutes later, he was staring out at a long concrete bridge that spanned the current. Beyond it lay the city.

The wind was colder now, driving along before a dull gray that threatened a storm. Below King, the water stretched out, heading toward the south and safety for the winter. He moved uncertainly away from the bridge, then dropped to his haunches, his tongue rolling out doubtfully as he stared at the bridge and the city beyond.

Something was wrong in his head. He scratched at his ear, turned to bite at the root of his tail, and still hesitated.

Finally he got to his feet and headed along the pitted surface of the bridge. A sign creaked, jerking his ears forward. It was only half a sign, without a place name, but carrying an iron engraving of its

population, now smeared over with weathered paint.

King bristled toward it, smelled it cautiously, and was abruptly nosing behind it frantically. There was only the whisper of the ghost of an odor there, and it was too faint to stimulate his senses more than once. He clawed at it, whining, but the scent from his dreams refused to return.

He began running again, leaping over gaps in the paving. One newly-fallen section was impassable, and he had to search his way across twelve-inch, rusty iron beams. He slipped twice, and had to scratch and fight his way back.

At mid-point, with the limits of the small city spread out before him, he stopped to explode in a barking sound he hadn't made in thirty years. Then he was plunging on again, until the bridge was behind and he was coursing through the wide, ruined streets at a full run.

Twice he started on false trails through the shops and warehouses, but the third time something seemed to groove itself into his thoughts, like the feeling that led him back to the salmon run each year. It was weak and uncertain, as old memories fought against stronger habits, but it grew as he panted his way out of the heart of the ruined city. Glass fractured and clattered downward from one building, followed by a skull that shattered on the stones.

King avoided the shower of

fragments and redoubled his speed, his big body bent in arching leaps, and his ears flattened back against his head.

He knew where he was, even before he swept through the last of the rooming house section and came to the edge of the rolling university campus. Then, for a moment, the dawning memory in his mind spun and twisted at the ruin the elements had made. But it was the lack of familiar smells that bothered him most. Even at the end, there had been the eternal odor of the chemistry laboratory, and now even that was gone.

The big gate was open. His legs had begun to bunch for the leap and scramble over it, and the tension in them died slowly. He slowed to a trot, lifting his head in a double bark that rasped the unfamiliar muscles of his throat. A huge tree had fallen across the path, but a section had been cut away with an axe. Rotted chips sounded underfoot as King passed by.

Then he was darting around one of the big redstone buildings, heading down the path that led to the back of the campus. There most of the great tree boles still stood, with even their nakedness too thick a screen for his eyes to penetrate. He charged through the rubble of sticks and rabbit bones that filled the path there and took a sudden left turn, to come to a skidding halt.

The two-story Promethean Labo-

ratory building still stood, and across the fence beyond some of the familiar houses were still there. King teetered toward one of them, back toward the laboratory, and then again toward the house. He let out two high-pitched barks, and cocked his ears, listening. There was no answering sound.

A sick whine grew in his throat, until the wind suddenly shifted.

The smell was stronger this time. It was wrong—incredibly wrong—but it was beyond mistake. Doc was here! And with the instinctive identification of wind direction, he knew it had to be the laboratory.

The door was closed, but it snapped open with a groan of hinges as King hit it in full leap. He went rolling over and over across the floor of the littered hall, clawing against the stone tiles instinctively, while his mind rocked at the waves of human scent and the human voice that was beating into his ears!

The smell was so strong to his unaccustomed nostrils that he had no directional sense; at first the echoes along the hollow corridors made it hard to locate the voice, also. He cocked his ears, studying it. It was wrong, like the smell—yet it was the voice of Doc!

"... as wrong as before. It didn't matter. It was better than starving like rabbits under the biocast. They were falling within minutes after the cable..."

King dove through the passage and into the room beyond. The

voice went on without pause, coming from a box in front of him. And now the metallic quality under it and the lack of the random ultrasonic overtones of a real voice registered on him. It was only another false voice—another of the things men had, but which he had almost forgotten. Doc's voice—without Doc!

The sound dropped to the bottom of his awareness. King swung around the room. There was something in the scent that made his neck muscles tense, but he knew Doc was there. His eyes adjusted to the glaring light inside, while his nose tried to cut a trail through the thickness of the odors. Both senses located the source at the same time.

Beside the big machine with the slow-spinning rolls of tape there was a bed covered with ragged blankets. A hand lay on the edge of the tape machine, twisted into the controls, and an arm led down at the figure below on the bed.

King's tail flailed the floor, and his legs doubled for the leap that would carry him into Doc's arms. But the motion was never completed. The wrongness of the scent and the motionless figure was too great. The tail grew limp as he crouched to the floor, inching his way forward, his whine barely audible.

He raised his nose at last to the other hand that lay dropping over the side of the bed, and his tongue came out.

The hand was cool and stiff, and there was no response to welcome King's caress.

Slowly, cringing within himself, King drew himself up to look down at what lay on the bed, and to nuzzle it. It didn't look like Doc. Doc had been young and alive, clean-shaven and with dark hair. The body was too thin, and the long beard and hair were stark white. Yet the odor said unquestionably that this was Doc—and that Doc was old—and dead!

Standing with his front feet on the bed, King lifted his muzzle upwards, his mouth opening while the deep, long sound ached in his chest. But no sound came. He brought his face down to that of Doc and nuzzled again, whimpering. It did no good.

For a long time he lay there, whining and crying. The voice went on and something ticked regularly on the wall. There was the sound of the wind outside, faint here, but rising steadily. Once King heard his own name used by Doc's voice from the box, and his ears half lifted.

"... King and the other three. Probably starved by now, though, since there are no land animals left for them to feed on. King was a smart dog, but . . ."

His name wasn't repeated, though he listened for a while. Later, the voice stopped entirely, while the tape hummed a few more times, clicked, and began flapping a loosened end that knocked over

a bottle of pills beside Doc's frozen hand. It clicked again, and slowed to silence, leaving the ticking of the clock the only sound in the room.

Abruptly, there was a rustling noise. King shot to his feet, whirling to face the source, just as a large white rat scuttled from the shadows near the door. It went rigid at his movement, coming slowly to its hind feet, its eyes darting from King to the body of Doc. It let out a high squeak.

The dog dived for it, snarling. But a threat of familiarity was clutching at his mind, slowing his charge. The rat twisted around and through the door, quavering out a series of squeaks. It went scuttling along the hall, through the opened door, and across the steps to the wasteland beyond. By the time King reached the outside, it was heading for the great tower across the street and half-way to the rocket field.

King could smell its spoor mixed thickly with that of Doc as he leaped the fence and followed. He heard it squeal once more as it saw him, and heard its claws scrape against the rotted metal of the tower as it scurried up beyond his reach.

But he was slowing already. The tower was dead now, with the great ball of fire gone from its top, but the memory of the tingling, itching false smell that had plagued him while the fire glowed was rising in his mind to drive him back. He hated it as Doc had hated

it—and there was still fear for what it had been. He stopped fifty feet beyond the massive girders, bristling as he backed around it.

The concrete hut under it was broken now, though, and the guards were gone. He saw some of the guns scattered about—or what was left of them—in the jumble of sand and human skeletons that still lay around the tower.

Some of the skeletons were further back, mixed with axes and other guns. An arm was still tangled with a shred of rope that connected to a faded metal sign. Where the great cable had been, a blackened line curved toward the tower, pitting the metal more deeply.

Somehow, King knew the tower of the tingling fire was dead. But he had waited too long. The rat had scrambled down and was heading toward the rocket field. He started after it again, halted, and reluctantly turned back toward the laboratory.

There was pleading in his whine as he found the body of Doc again, but it still bore the smell of death. Instinct told King that Doc was dead, and would never be anything but dead. Yet there was the half-remembered smell of his brother Boris, after the sweet smells and the prickings, lying on the table while Doc and the men stood around.

Boris had smelled dead—and Boris had walked again, smelling freshly alive. Before that, there

had been the dead rats that would not stay dead. And the rabbits—though when the rabbits finally smelled dead, they were all dead, and no more rabbits lived.

He circled Doc uneasily, his lips lifted. He paced to the outer door, searching for any return of the rat, while his mind slowly remembered the other rats. With a quick check on Doc, King darted up the stairs, his legs making a familiar pattern of it, and into the great laboratory there.

There were no more rats. The cages were empty, and the scents he had learned here as a puppy were almost gone. Only the room itself was the same as the one that had haunted his hunger-driven dreams.

There had been the rats on the table when he was young and the tower was only a banging beyond the window. The rats that died, and the three that did not, when the men drank smelly liquid and shouted and danced all night, shaking their fists at the base of the tower. The table was still there, beyond the place where the men mixed the strange smells. The table where strange things happened to him later that he could not remember.

The tail he had owned before the last time on the table still hung there. There had been another wild night when the bandages came off his new tail, puppy-small and weak, but growing quickly enough. This room had been a good place, and

some of his later dreams had been good.

Other dreams had remembered the bad times, as they came back to his mind now. The night the tower blazed with fire, Doc swearing while King felt the tingling until it was cut off. The men arguing with Doc, not coming back—even moving toward the hated tower. The huge celebration outside when the tower blazed again, while Doc and his one friend cried. The wild frenzy of stringing wires over the Promethean lab and into a vile-smelling box. After that, there was no more tingling in his nostrils inside the lab, but things had grown worse in spite of it.

King was trembling as he finished his inspection for rats, and his legs beat a frantic tattoo down the stairs. The fear was as thick as it had been when the men came and took him and his brothers away from Doc, to jam them into planes with other dogs and dump them far away, where the rabbits were thick—and almost useless for food.

Doc had fought then, even moving outside the safety of the laboratory, but the men had taken the dogs. Yet Doc had been alive. And now he was dead.

The fear twisted in King, settling into something sick. He paced around the body, growling and whining. Once he stopped to lick the hand. It was colder now, and there was no moisture on it. The scent was growing more wrong as the body cooled.

Life had not come back while he was gone.

He licked Doc's hand again, and an answering chill went through the dog. The feeling of death began to settle deeper—a feeling inside that grew and swallowed him, a hungry feeling. He shook it away, as he would have shaken the neck of the rat, but it came back stronger than before.

There was real hunger mixed with it. Eating was never good on the trip south, and he had burned too much energy chasing about that morning. The fish had not been enough. The smell of stale food of some kind in the room tantalized him, though he could find none, and reminded him that there had been traces of the same odors along the path the rat had taken. The saliva was rising in his mouth at the thought. It drew him out, while the death inside pressed him away.

He started off twice, to return each time for another inspection. He whimpered and tried tugging at the sleeve of the arm. The rags parted, but Doc gave no sign. The death smell was stronger. King paced about, fighting the hunger and misery until they were too much. There was the food smell, the rat—and when he came back to Doc . . .

A faint mist was being driven along by the wind as he reached the tower again, braving it this time without stopping. Until the rain washed it away, the spoor would be all the stronger for the

moisture in the air, and he followed it easily, until it ended on the blasted area of the rocket field.

King stopped at the sight of the bent and worn take-off cradles. From the distance, the first faint roll of thunder came, and he bolted stiff-legged, snarling with fear, as if one of the monster ships he had seen the men building so frantically were blasting up again.

The excitement of the frenzied construction had drawn him to it, even when it meant sneaking away from Doc—until he had been present after the infants were all aboard, and the rocket took off. The thunder-booming roar, the gout of eye-searing flame and the smell that paralyzed his nose for hours had sent him cringing back to shiver at Doc's feet, and each new take-off had brought a fresh attack. He still wanted nothing to do with the rockets.

The cradles were empty now, however—except for something that looked like one that had crashed down and was lying on its sides, the big tubes ripped away, and the ground scorched around it. And as he looked, the distant form of the rat appeared from below it and leaped upwards through a door there.

King edged toward it, following the trail that led there, uncertain. It looked dead, but the other that had roared away on its lightning and thunder had also seemed dead. Then lightning and thunder boom-

ed behind him, and he forced himself to a faster trot.

The hulk seemed harmless. There were none of the chemical smells now, and the fumes of the ancient blast that had fizzled were gone. He moved gingerly toward the door, his nose twitching at the odors that came from it, just as the rat appeared.

It saw him and squeaked sharply, dashing back inside. King abandoned his caution. With a low growl, he leaped through the doorway above the ground. The edge of the metal tore at him, thin projections sticking out where it had been crudely hacked away. He snapped at it, then turned to find the rat.

There was enough light inside to see dimly. The rat had retreated into a narrow pipe that ran back. King tried to poke his nose into it, then fished with his paw. The rat drew back and snapped at him. Its teeth missed, but it was enough to teach him caution.

He drew back, crunching across a litter of dried papers, foil and junk he could not recognize. A thicker bundle twisted under his feet, and the thick, heavy smell of meat—red meat, not the weak flesh of fish—filled his nostrils. Without thinking, he snapped down.

The stuff was dry and hard, disappointing at first. But as he chewed, over the salt and the odd flavorings, the almost forgotten flavor came through, sending saliva dripping from his mouth. From the

odors here, he knew the rat had been eating it before he came, but it didn't matter.

He finished the package, spitting out the wax, metal, paper and plastics that surrounded it as best he could. Then his nose led him along the trail of the rat's gnawing, back to the few tons of concentrate that were left.

There was no smell to guide him from the outside of the packages, but he had learned to find food where it could be discovered. He tore into a package, gasping as a thick, fruity stuff seared at his tongue. He tried again, further away. It was food, this time. He ripped away the covering first, and settled down with the brick between his paws, working on it until it was gone.

Outside, the rain had increased to a torrent. He studied the rat and the view outside, and finally curled up against the door, blocking the rat's egress. Some rain came through, making a small puddle on the floor and wetting his coat, but he disregarded it at first, until the thirst began to grow in him. He lapped at the puddle, finding some relief.

His stomach began to feel wrong then. It was heavy, full, and miserable. He fought against it, lapping more water. The rat came out of its hole and found another brick of food. He heard it gnawing, but the effort of moving was too great.

When the sickness finally won, he felt better. But it was an hour

later, while the storm raged and the lightning split the sky with waves of solid fear, before he could pull himself back to another brick. This time he ate more carefully, stopping to drink between parts of his meal. It worked better. The food stuck with him, and his hunger was finally satisfied.

He lay near the doorway of the old rocket, staring out through the darkness that was still split by lightning. The rat scurried about behind him, but he let it go. Now that it was harmless and his stomach was filled, some of the old pattern began to stir in his mind. It was one of the rats he had known so long ago, its smell grown old, but still clearly identifiable.

He had tried twice to leave the ship and force his way back to where Doc was lying, but the lightning drove him back. Now he lifted his voice in a long, mournful bark. There was no answering call from Doc. He began working himself up for another try.

Lightning crashed down in the direction of the laboratory. The building itself stood out in the glare, with every wire of its outer covering glowing white hot. There was a roll of sharp, near thunder, and then another explosion that seemed to open the laboratory up in a blossom of flame through the abating rain.

King muttered unhappily, licking his lips uneasily, while his tail curved tighter against him. But now, while the flame still smolder-

ed around the distant building and the lightning might come back, now was no time to risk it.

He turned around several times, scraping away the litter, buried his nose in the tuft of his tail, and tried to relax. He was almost asleep when he felt the rat creep up to him. It must have recognized his smell, too, since it settled down against him as it had done when they were both together in the laboratory with Doc. He snarled faintly, then let it alone, and went to sleep. Surprisingly, there were no dreams to bother him.

The rat was gone in the morning when King awoke, and the sun was shining, though the quieter wind held a coldness that was too close to freezing to suit him. He hesitated, turning back toward the food stores. Then the sight of the rat, racing across the space near the tower, decided him. With an unhappy growl, he dropped from the hulk of the rocket and took out after it.

If the rat got there before he did, and Doc needed him . . .

In open running, the rat was no match for him. It drew aside, its high voice chattering, as he thundered up. He did not turn, but drove on, heading at a full run for the laboratory.

There was no laboratory! The steps were there, blackened and cracked. Some of the walls still stood. But the building he had known was gone. Beside it, the trunk of one of the big trees had

been blasted apart, and now had its tattered remnants strewn over the dirt, mingling with the coals from the fire that had gutted the building.

A few were still smoking, though the rain had put out the blaze before it had completely burned out by itself. The heavy, acrid scent of damp, burned wood loaded the air, concealing everything else from his scent.

He uttered a short, anguished yelp and went dashing through the doorway. The ashes were hot, and the stones left from the floor were hotter, but he could stand them. He hardly felt them as he swung toward what had once been the room where Doc lay.

The box from which the voice had come was gone, but the twisted wreck of the tape machine was there. And beside it, charred scraps showed what had once been a bed.

King cried out as his nose touched the heat, but he was pawing frantically, disregarding the pain. He could stand it—and he had to. He shoveled the refuse aside, digging for something that was his. And finally, under the charred raggedness, there were traces. There was even enough to know that it had once been Doc.

And Doc was still dead—as dead as the meat that once came from can had been dead.

King whimpered over the remains, while the rat climbed onto a section of the wall and chattered uneasily. But the dog was already

backing away. He stopped beyond the hot ruins of the building to lift his head. For a second, he held the pose while the rat watched him, before his head came down and he turned slowly away.

The food in the rocket lay to his right, and the old gate through which he had first come was on his left. He licked his lips as his eyes turned to the rocket, but his legs moved unwaveringly left.

The steady walk turned into a trot, and his stride lengthened, carrying him back to the rooming-house section, and on into the former business section. There had been other fires, and one had spread across several blocks. He swung around it and back to the street he had first taken.

Ahead of him, the bridge came into view, and nearer was the bank of the river on this side.

King did not waver from his course. His legs paced out onto the rotten pavement that would carry him across the stream. He moved on, slowing as he had to walk the girders again. When he was past that section, and at the mid-point of the bridge, something seemed to turn him.

The town lay behind him from here, most of it visible at the crest of the bridge. The rain and the storm had made changes, but they were too small to notice. And the university lay at the edge of King's vision, though some of the tower could be seen. He faced toward it, and then unerringly toward the

place where the laboratory should have been.

Now his muzzle lifted into the air as he sank to his haunches. He seemed to brace himself, and his lungs expanded slowly. He could feel it, and the need of it. The instinct behind it was too old for remembrance, but the ritual came finally by itself, with no conscious control.

His mouth opened, and the dirge keened on the air, lifting and driv-

ing upwards toward the empty sky above.

There was only the single requiem. Then King swung back toward the distant shore, picking his way along the worn bridge.

He slipped down the crumbled bank to the thin edge of sand near the stream and turned southward, trotting on steadily with the cold wind at his back.

Somewhere, there would be a place to fish for his breakfast.

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FU 61

life force

by . . . Benjamin Ferris

The creature was like no other beast. Silent and still it sat waiting—for human life to end.

WHEN THEY finished washing down the leopard cages, Walter Brown mopped a perspiring brow, and started across to the next building, which housed the larger cats.

Henry Taylor remained in front of the last small cage, next to the ocelots, scowling at its single occupant. The animal he was watching sat perfectly still. It was about the size of a boxer dog, and had an odd, blocky build with thick limbs ending in tiny paws. The fur was a rich brown. Its small bright eyes had followed every movement of the two keepers.

Walter came back and said, "Is that thing still bothering you?" He yawned. "They haven't even figured out what to name it."

Henry shrugged his powerful shoulders, reminding himself that Walter just worked as an animal nursemaid to make a living. He, on the other hand, was studying nights so that he could be a zoo director some day.

"I don't think they know what it is," he said, a little impatiently.

"It came from Australia, didn't it?"

Every so often there comes to our desk a story so flawlessly integrated, so breathlessly exciting with its daringly off-trail quality of suspense that we can't lay it down even to reach for an acceptance slip. Or, if we must be precise, to dictate a letter of acceptance. If zoos fascinate you with their deep, dark jungle mysteriousness, and if exotic animals cause a breath from the Unknown to blow chill upon you—this yarn is indubitably your meat.

"It was shipped from there, all right. But it's not a Tasmanian Devil, or a wombat, or anything similar. I looked 'em up."

Walter cocked his head as coughing roars came from the lion cages beyond. "Ohoh. Sounds like Sahib's in a bad mood this morning. We better get going."

They moved on, but Henry's thoughts stayed with the strange new animal. In a zoo you get used to the feeling of being watched. But this creature's eyes weren't right. They were too . . . well, intelligent. And there was something odd about its body. It seemed jointed wrong.

Henry lived with his mother a few blocks away from the zoo. After dinner that evening he got up abruptly. "I'm going out for a walk, Ma."

"All right, Son." The old lady smiled at him. "Over to see Betty?"

Henry shook his head. "Back to the park for a while."

At the zoo office he found old Chuck, the night man, peacefully smoking, with his feet on a desk.

"Hello, Henry. Don't you get enough of this place in the daytime?"

"Guess not. How's everything?"

"Little rumpus over in the camel paddock. And Sahib's still raisin' Cain. I think the old boy's got a bad tooth."

"How about the other cats?" Henry asked.

"Quiet as babies. Why?"

"Just wondered." Henry leaned

over the cage on the desk. It contained a small, apathetic monkey.

"That Rhesus female's been sick," Chuck said defensively. "I didn't want her whinin' to disturb the others."

Henry smiled to himself. Old Chuck never fooled anybody with his gruffness. There wasn't a sick or lonesome animal in the park the night man didn't comfort during the long dark hours.

Henry left the office and took the outer path, past the ponds and the corrals. A few dim lights outlined the way. The water fowl were sleeping, their heads tucked under their wings. The fallow deer heard him coming and drifted to the far side of their pasture. The mountain sheep bumped their heads hopefully against the wire, looking for handouts.

It was a big zoo, for the size of the city. Henry went past the elephant house and the bear pits. Everything was still. He heard nothing but the faint rumbling of traffic. The path became lined with iron railings. Behind them open-fronted cages housed small mammals—foxes, wolves, jackals, raccoons.

He stopped suddenly. The faint uneasiness that had plagued him all day became acute. It wasn't normal for things to be so quiet. Zoos come to life after the public has gone. Many animals are awake and restless at night, prowling, climbing, sniffing, calling.

From the corner of his eye,

Henry saw movement. Near the ground, to the left. He whirled.

But there was nothing. Had he imagined it? Or was it just some trick of the light? Tensely, he moved on to the cage holding the new animal. It was the previous home of a jaguar which had died of old age. He had a clear view of the interior. It was empty.

Henry ran down an alley to the service driveway behind the cages, then sprinted several hundred feet to the office.

"Chuck," he panted, "that new Australian animal's out of his cage."

The night man scrambled to his feet and grabbed his flashlight. "He was in there the last time I made my rounds." He checked his gun and reached for a hickory pole tipped with steel.

Henry got a rope and a net and took a gun from a cupboard. They hurried to the cage. In the beam of Chuck's light, they saw a little mound of lustrous fur hunched against the back wall.

"I swear it wasn't there before!" Henry exclaimed in stunned incredulity.

"That's all right," Chuck said mildly. He flashed his light around, checking the wire. The animal watched with bright, unblinking eyes. "Always best to play it safe. Let's have a look at the back."

Both outer and inner doors were securely double-latched. Chuck gave a satisfied grunt. "That thing ain't dangerous, but it might have

been hard to catch. Cooper would have raised hell if it got away."

"I'm not so sure it isn't dangerous. You ever handle a wolverine?"

"Now wait a minute, boy. This ain't a wolverine."

"No." Henry brooded at the cage. "But it affects me the same way."

After the men left, the animal continued to sit perfectly still. It stayed this way for perhaps twenty minutes. Then it abruptly changed shape. The blocky body thinned and shot out till it was seven feet long. The fur vanished, leaving a smooth iridescent surface. The clumsy limbs and paws disappeared, replaced by several circular bulges on the underside. The head became a shining knob, like a steel ball. Only the eyes remained the same, two small orbs burning brightly in that incredible head.

The creature, with a movement like a spring snapping, darted to the door. A tiny pseudopod crept out and under it. There was a click, then the rasp of sliding metal. The body flipped through the opening. The process was repeated on the second door.

The creature whipped to the ground, traveled rapidly along the service alley, then angled toward the reptile house. It was propelled by the bulges on its undersurface, in a manner which could only be described as *rolling*.

The metal doors of the reptile house were carefully fitted into channel iron. This was understand-

able for a building that housed cobras, rattlers, kraits and coral snakes. The zoo's new animal snuggled against the cement sill and extruded three tough filaments which it sent through the minute crack. There was a grinding sound. The lock mechanism snapped. The door swung open.

The python was deep in torpor. But some insistent pressure penetrated the sluggish germ-plasm of its brain. The big coils twitched a little. The spade-shaped head came up and swung groggily back and forth. Then the snake's body went rigid.

Inside its cage, not six feet away, was an intruder. The python's tongue licked out. The long narrow lungs gathered air.

But the hiss never came. The python became transfixed. The creature was communicating with it.

A little later, the puff adders had the same experience. Then the king snakes and boas. Hypnotized, they lay before that shimmering body with the compelling eyes, and absorbed what it was giving them.

The water buffalo's first impulse was to charge. The thick nostrils flared, the mighty neck muscles bunched, and attack-anger flooded hot and sweet . . .

Then it all drained away, leaving the buffalo confused and puzzled. Something happened to its brain. New images appeared. Things that had been dim became abruptly sharp and clear. Humbly, the great

animal lowered its head and listened.

The gorilla was badly frightened. For, in spite of its strength and savage reputation, the great ape had come to look at the concrete and steel of its cage as a protection. M'Bongo had been born in captivity. He had no wish to be let loose among those weird jungle creatures outside.

So when he awakened to see this unknown thing glide briskly across his floor and flip six feet straight up to his shelf it was more than he could bear. He shrieked and jumped to the floor below, landing with a jar that shook the building. He raised his huge arms protectively and began to whimper.

Then those bright eyes caught him. And though it had no mouth, the thing began to talk. M'Bongo's fear went away. He became completely absorbed, sitting on the floor, clasping his feet in his big-knuckled hands.

When old Chuck came by, flashing his light along the walls, the gorilla didn't even notice. But his visitor broke off, whipped out the door, and sped away. When Chuck reached the row of cages, he found all of them properly full.

MR. COOPER, the zoo director, was a thin man with a discontented face. His office was in a neat stone building far from the noises and smells of the animals. He looked at Henry impatiently.

"Mr. Cooper," Henry said, hard-

ly knowing how to begin. "That new animal in the jaguar's cage. There's something funny about it."

Mr. Cooper frowned at him. "Have you seen very many Australian carnivores?"

"No, sir. But I've been around animals a lot. This one doesn't act right."

Cooper's tone became ironic. "How do you know, if you never saw one before?"

"I don't mean that, exactly. I mean—"

"Is it upsetting the other animals?"

"No-o."

"Is it damaging the cage?"

"No, sir." Henry took a deep breath. How could he explain the wrongness that he sensed?

"Well," Cooper said, "I appreciate your concern. But don't you think your imagination has been working overtime?"

Henry colored. "There's something else. I checked that shipment. It left Hobart, Tasmania as a Tasmanian Devil, *Sarcophilus harrisii*. But what arrived here is something else."

"How do you know that?"

"I looked them up. The skull-shape is entirely different—higher and more rounded. The snout is longer. The eyes are set much lower. They're marsupials, but I can't see a pouch on this one. The fur should be black with irregular white spots, instead of uniform dark brown."

Cooper sighed. "Probably a new

species, that's all. We'll get it checked out in due time. Now, if you don't mind, I'm pretty busy..."

Henry opened his mouth to protest. Then he closed it without speaking, nodded, and left the office. He found Walter Brown chopping up fruits and lettuce in the small mammal house.

"What'd the Old Man say?"

"Thought I was nuts, I guess."

Henry picked up a knife and started to work. "But I'm not. There's something wrong about that animal, and I'm going to find out what."

It was a normal day. A zebra colt was born. Two capuchin monkeys got into a screeching, hair-pulling fight and had to be separated. A small boy stuck his finger through the wire of a parrot cage and got a painful nip.

The new animal sat quietly. It was in no hurry. It had already been on Earth a considerable time, assuming various forms and testing its powers. It was well aware of the risks in this alien environment.

It had learned early that its telepathic powers had little effect on the dominant life-form here. Their mentalities were too powerful. Even to get physically close to them was uncomfortable.

So, while it observed the transportation, power and communications systems of the planet, it had set about devising a new invasion plan based on the lower forms of Earth-life. These, it found, it could reach and control.

It discovered concentrations of these lower forms near large cities. The alien had picked out a zoo. Then it had intercepted an animal shipment and taken the place of one of the specimens. Once inside, it had been able to work undisturbed, preparing the way for those who would follow when it gave the word.

Now, its work was nearly done.

Just before quitting time Walter said, "Henry, you notice how jittery the elephants are?"

Henry nodded soberly.

"Notice anything else?"

"Nope."

"Have you heard the howler monkey? Or a peacock scream? Or any of the cats?"

Walter looked startled. "Hey, you're right. It's too damned quiet!"

"Yeah. I think I'll come back after dinner. I'm worried."

"Don't be a sucker. Nobody'll thank you for it."

"I know. But this thing's got under my skin."

The city was quiet, in the early-evening lull. Henry had decided to plant himself where he could watch the "Australian" animal. Maybe nothing would happen, but at least he'd feel better for it. He cut across behind the reptile house to the kangaroo paddock. Too bad, he thought, that they couldn't talk. They could tell him all he wanted to know about Tasmanian Devils.

He came stealthily up behind a

clump of acacia. The light on the path gave him an adequate view of the cage and its motionless occupant. He settled himself to wait and watch.

The alien creature kept track of Henry's approach. The bright eyes followed him into his hiding place. Last night, this would have been disturbing. But not now.

Henry dropped out of the alien's attention. With the coming of darkness, it had left its cage to perform certain errands. What it had to do now was not a physical thing, but something that would take all of its enormous telepathic faculties.

OLD CHUCK didn't realize the tiger had entered his office, till the sick monkey gave a scream of terror. He looked up with a jerk. The big head was so close he felt the puff of musky breath. His body muscles tightened convulsively, but before he could move the tiger struck. The paw caught him on the side of the head, swept him from his chair, and smashed him against the far wall with bone-cracking force.

Ignoring the hysterical monkey, the tiger trotted purposefully away.

All over the zoo, the cages were empty. A long springy body, blurry with speed, had whipped along them, slipping the catches and forcing the locks.

Now the animals were busy with their assignments. In the surrounding neighborhoods, through block

after block of quiet residential streets, the panic-makers spread.

Housewives, peacefully putting out garbage, were confronted by the hideous faces of baboons. Citizens walking their dogs were charged by ravening timber-wolves. Bears shouldered their way into living rooms, growling and cuffing at the stricken householders. Lions padded across lawns, thumped over porches, roared into basement workrooms, loomed up in windows. Leopards and panthers worked above ground, leaping onto balconies, tearing at screens, thudding across rooftops, and shattering skylights.

Single-mindedly, the animals carried out the instructions of their alien commander. The wild pigs, the bobcats, the kangaroos, the ocelots, the sun bears, the alligators. The howler monkeys, with their blood-chilling screams. The hyenas, with their wild and horrible laughter.

Terror swept the city. Thousands of calls jammed the police switchboards and the newspapers. Armed with hammers and brooms and kitchen knives, white-faced residents crouched behind barred doors. They were hysterical, disorganized.

Other animals had more specific jobs. The gorilla's great hands flipped out manhole covers. The python and other constrictors flowed down and wrapped their massive coils around key telephone cables, water and gas connections. Sys-

tematically, they ruptured the utility systems.

The orang-utans and chimpanzees—those with the clever hands—went to the dial telephone office, to the electrical substations, to radio and TV control rooms. While the tigers crushed or chased out the human guardians, they made a chaos of the switching and broadcasting equipment. And new terror smote the city's people as the lights went off.

The elephants, the rhinos and the buffalos had a different job. Their heavy bodies thumping along the pavement, they went directly to the main street intersections. Oblivious to the shrieks of startled humans, they went after the parked cars. Using their massive heads, they shoved the vehicles helter-skelter out into the traffic lanes. Soon the highways were effectively choked.

The rest of the animals swarmed down the business streets, into the bars, the restaurants and clubrooms, the theaters. Elk, gnus, lamas, tapirs, jackals, wart hogs, the rock boas and rattlesnakes, the bandicoots. Snarling or grunting or hissing or screeching, they created pandemonium.

Back at the zoo, in the Earth-form it had assumed, the bright-eyed alien waited. It kept contact with the rebellion telepathically, receiving the sensory impressions of the animals as they crippled the city. Very soon, now, it would be

ready for the next step of the invasion.

And as it crouched and waited, Henry Taylor, behind his screen of acacia, heard the sirens and shouts. He assumed it was a big fire. Then the light on the path winked out, shutting off his view of the cage. He thought the globe or a fuse had gone, or that perhaps the fire had caused a power failure. He moved cautiously away from the trees to the service alley behind the main row of cages. He found a storage cupboard and took out a powerful electric lantern.

Then he stood a few moments in thought. He made a drastic decision. There was only one way to settle this thing. If that animal really were a Tasmanian Devil, a marsupial, it should have a pouch like a kangaroo. He had not been able to see one. But if he could get close enough to part the fur on its belly, he could settle it once and for all—and get this thing off his mind.

So he got two iron-tipped poking sticks and went to the cage, where he let himself into the back compartment, which was separated from the front section by a heavy door. He wedged a portable cage against this inner door, then slid it open.

He went outside and pointed the lantern at the animal. He pushed one of the poles through the wire. "All right," he muttered, "get moving. Back into that little cage."

The creature flipped its body to

avoid the touch of the steel point. It was impossibly fast. Henry's jaw sagged. He set the lantern down and stared at it. Then he shook his head and took up the other pole. Grunting with effort, he maneuvered the goads.

With unbelievably agility, the animal whirled and leapt to keep from being touched. Henry was wringing wet when he finally managed to work it into the doorway. He pried the door shut, then sagged against the wire, panting.

Slowly, he picked up his gear, and walked around to the back. He felt dizzy, but not from exertion. No living animal could move like that. *What was this thing?*

The alien was motionless in the exact center of the portable cage. Its bright eyes gleamed through the bars at the human. But most of its attention was still focused on the animals it had let loose in the city. It couldn't afford to break contact with them now. Control was getting harder and harder to maintain, because of the disturbing nearness of this other body. If it could only hang on a little while longer . . .

Meanwhile, Henry had forgotten all about looking for the marsupial pouch. He was overwhelmed by a more shocking circumstance. Every atom of the kind of life he was cried that this thing before him was *different*.

Something touched Henry's mind. He got fleeting pictures of emptiness, gleaming metal, a stark

unknown landscape, extreme cold. They were darting pressures beating at his consciousness.

He shook his head to clear it. He moved a few inches closer to the cage. And he sensed a tiny beat of alarm.

Henry scowled. Was it possible he could know what it felt? He bit his sweaty upper lip, and cautiously reached one hand out.

This time there was no doubt. He felt a sharp pulse of fear coming from the cage!

When the alien broke contact, the zoo's animals stopped in their tracks. They had no memory of what had happened, of why they were here in the city. They realized only that they were far from their familiar surroundings. Lost and scared, they scattered blindly.

The thing in the cage was already weak from the strain of this climactic night. Now the invasion was forgotten, as it faced a threat to its very existence.

Slowly, acting more by instinct than reason, Henry spread both arms over the cage. The creature made no sound. It didn't move a hair. But pure terror surged from it.

Henry didn't stop to wonder

why. All he knew was that it didn't belong where it was, and it was terribly afraid of him. So he did an incredibly brave thing. He reached through the bars and grabbed it with both hands.

His mind recoiled from a soundless shriek of despair. The creature went frantic. It whipped and spun around the cage, too disorganized to use its full strength or its cunning. Changes rippled over it. The snout became a steel-colored knob. The furry body snapped out to three times its length and back again. The tiny paws appeared and disappeared as the body writhed.

Both Henry's arms were broken. But somehow he held on, aware of nothing but the shrieking in his head and the need to stop it.

Abruptly the alien went still. All Earth characteristics dropped away. It lay revealed—the long body with the odd locomotive bulges, the metallic head, the eyes no longer bright.

The alien was dead, as death was measured in the place from which it came. That place where life was different from the spark we have on Earth. So different that the very touch of our kind of life was enough to snuff it out.

the nothing

by . . . Frank Herbert

The Nothings stemmed from the future's tragic lack of courage. But one man and woman dared to shape a more audacious tomorrow.

IF IT hadn't been for the fight with my father I'd never have gone down to the Tavern and then I wouldn't have met the *Nothing*. This *Nothing* was really just an ordinary looking guy. He wasn't worth special attention unless, like me, you were pretending you were Marla Graim, the feelies star, and him Sidney Harch meeting you in the bar to give you a spy capsule.

It was all my father's fault. Imagine him getting angry because I wouldn't take a job burning brush. What kind of work is that for an eighteen-year-old girl anyway? I know my folks were hard pressed for money but that was no excuse for the way he lit into me.

We had the fight over lunch but it was after six o'clock before I got the chance to sneak out of the house. I went down to the Tavern because I knew the old man would be madder than a tele in a lead barrel when he found out. There was no way I could keep it from him, of course. He pried me every time I came home.

The Tavern is a crossroads place where the talent gets together to

Though Frank Herbert started free-lancing less than two years ago his writing career for the past fifteen years has been both accomplished and varied. He has been copy or managing editor of the Salem, Oregon, Statesman, Portland Journal, Tacoma Times, Seattle Star and the Santa Rosa, California, Press-Democrat. His stories have appeared in COLLIER'S and ESQUIRE, and a number of science fiction magazines. There's prophetic magic in this star-bright tale of tomorrow.

compare notes, and talk about jobs. I'd only been in there once before, and that time with my father. He warned me not to go there alone because a lot of the jags used the place. You could smell the stuff all over the main room. There was pink smoke from a hyro bowl drifting up around the rafters. Someone had a Venusian Oin filter going. There was a lot of talent there for so early in the evening.

I found an empty corner of the bar and ordered a blue fire because I'd seen Marla Graim ask for one in the feelies. The bartender stared at me sharply and I suspected he was a tele, but he didn't pry. After awhile he floated my drink up to me and 'ported away my money. I sipped the drink the way I'd seen Marla Graim do, but it was too sweet. I tried not to let my face show anything.

The bar mirror gave me a good broad view of the room and I kept looking into it as though I was expecting somebody. Then this big blond young man came through the front door. I saw him in the mirror and immediately knew he was going to take the seat beside me. I'm not exactly a prescient, but sometimes those things are obvious.

He came across the room, moving with a gladiator ease between the packed tables. That's when I pretended I was Marla Graim waiting at a Port Said bar to pick up a spy capsule from Sidney Harch like in the feelie I'd seen Sunday.

This fellow did look a little like Harch—curly hair, dark blue eyes, face all sharp angles as if it had been chiseled by a sculptor who'd left the job uncompleted.

He took the stool beside me as I'd known he would, and ordered a blue fire, easy on the sugar. Naturally, I figured this was a get-acquainted gambit and wondered what to say to him. Suddenly, it struck me as an exciting idea to just ride along with the Marla Graim plot until it came time to leave.

He couldn't do anything to stop me even if he was a 'porter. You see, I'm a pyro and that's a good enough defense for anyone. I glanced down at my circa-twenty skirt and shifted until the slit exposed my garter the way I'd seen Marla Graim do it. This blond lad didn't give it a tumble. He finished his drink, and ordered another.

I whiffed him for one of the cokes, but he was dry. No jag. The other stuff in the room was getting through to me, though, and I was feeling dizzy. I knew I'd have to leave soon and I'd never get another chance to be a Marla Graim type; so I said, "What's yours?"

Oh, he knew I was talking to him all right, but he didn't even look up. It made me mad. A girl has some pride and there I'd unbent enough to start the conversation! There was an ashtray piled with scraps of paper in front of him. I concentrated on it and the paper suddenly flamed. I'm a good pyro when I want to be. Some men

have been kind enough to say I could start a fire without the talent. But with a prying father like mine how would I ever know?

The fire got this fellow's attention. He knew I'd started it. He just glanced at me once and turned away. "Leave me alone," he said. "I'm a *Nothing*."

I don't know what it was. Maybe I have a little of the tele like that doctor said once, but I knew he was telling the truth. It wasn't one of those gags like you see in the feelies. You know—where there are two comedians and one says, "What's yours?" And the other one answers, "Nothing."

Only all the time he's levitating the other guy's chair and juggling half a dozen things behind his back, no hands. You know the gag. It's been run into the ground. Well, when he said that, it kind of set me back. I'd never seen a real-life *Nothing* before. Oh, I knew there were some. In the government preserves and such, but I'd never been like this—right next to one.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm a pyro."

He glanced at the ashes in the tray and said, "Yeah. I know."

"There's not much work for pyros any more," I said. "It's the only talent I have." I turned and looked at him. Handsome in spite of being a *Nothing*. "What did you do?" I asked.

"I ran away," he said. "I'm a fugitive from the Sonoma Preserve."

That made my blood tingle. Not only a *Nothing*, but a fugitive, too. Just like in the feelies. I said, "Do you want to hide out at my place?"

That brought him around. He looked me over and he actually blushed. Actually! I'd never seen a man blush before. That fellow certainly was loaded with firsts for me.

"People might get the wrong idea when I'm caught," he said. "I'm sure to be caught eventually. I always am."

I was really getting a feeling for that woman-of-the-world part. "Why not enjoy your freedom then?" I asked.

I let him see a little more through the circa-twenty slit. He actually turned away! Imagine!

That's when the police came. They didn't make any fuss. I'd noticed these two men standing just inside the door watching us. Only I'd thought they were watching me. They came across the room and one of them bent over this fellow.

"All right, Claude," he said. "Come quietly."

The other took my arm and said, "You'll have to come, too, sister."

I jerked away from him. "I'm not your sister," I said.

"Oh, leave her alone, fellows," said this Claude. "I didn't tell her anything. She was just trying to pick me up."

"Sorry," said the cop. "She comes, too."

That's when I began to get

scared. "Look," I said. "I don't know what this is all about."

The man showed me the snout of a hypo gun in his pocket. "Stop the commotion and come quietly, sister, or I'll have to use this," he said.

So who wants to go to sleep? I went quietly, praying we'd run into my father or someone I knew so I could explain things. But no such luck.

The police had a plain old jet buggy outside with people clustered around looking at it. A 'porter in the crowd was having fun jiggling the rear end up and down off the ground. He was standing back with his hands in his pockets, grinning.

The cop who'd done all the talking just looked toward this 'porter and the fellow lost his grin and hurried away. I knew then the cop was a tele, although he hadn't touched my mind. They're awfully sensitive about their code of ethics, some of those teles.

It was fun riding in that old jet buggy. I'd never been in one before. One of the cops got in back with Claude and me. The other one drove. It was the strangest feeling, flying up over the bay on the tractors. Usually, whenever I wanted to go someplace, I'd just ask, polite like, was there a 'porter around and then I'd think of where I wanted to go and the 'porter would set me down there quick as a wink.

Of course, I wound up in some old gent's apartment now and then.

Some 'porters do that sort of thing for a fee. But a pyro doesn't have to worry about would-be Casanovas. No old gent is going to fool around when his clothes are on fire.

Well, the jet buggy finally set down on an old hospital grounds way back up in the sticks and the cops took us to the main building and into a little office. Walking, mind you. It was shady in the office—not enough lights—and it took a minute for my eyes to adjust after the bright lights in the hall. When they did adjust and I saw the old codger behind the desk I did a real double take. It was Mensor Williams. Yeah. The *Big All*. Anything anybody else can do he can do better.

Somebody worked a switch somewhere and the lights brightened. "Good evening, Miss Carlysle," he said and his little goatee bobbed.

Before I could make a crack about ethics against reading minds, he said, "I'm not intruding into your mental processes. I've merely scanned forward to a point where I learn your name."

A prescient, too!

"There really wasn't any need to bring her," he told the cops. "But it was inevitable that you would." Then he did the funniest thing. He turned to Claude and nodded his head toward me. "How do you like her, Claude?" he asked. Just like I was something offered for sale or something!

Claude said, "Is she the one, Dad?"

Dad! That one smacked me. The *Big All* has a kid and the kid's a *Nothing*!

"She's the one," said Williams.

Claude kind of squared his shoulders and said, "Well, I'm going to throw a stick into the works. I won't do it!"

"Yes, you will," said Williams.

This was all way over my head and I'd had about enough anyway. I said, "Now wait a minute, gentlemen, or I'll set the place on fire! I mean literally!"

"She can do it, too," said Claude, grinning at his father.

"But she won't," said Williams.

"Oh, won't I?" I said. "Well, you just try and stop me!"

"No need to do that," said Williams. "I've seen what's going to happen."

Just like that! These prescients give me the creeps. Sometimes I wonder if they don't give themselves the creeps. Living for them must be like repeating a part you already know. Not for me. I said, "What would happen if I did something different from what you'd seen?"

Williams leaned forward with an interested look in his eyes. "It's never happened," he said. "If it did happen once, that'd be a real precedent."

I can't be sure, but looking at him there, I got the idea he'd really be interested to see something happen different from his forecast. I thought of starting a little fire, maybe in the papers on his

desk. But somehow the idea didn't appeal to me. It wasn't that any presence was in my mind telling me not to. I don't know exactly what it was. I just didn't *want* to do it. I said, "What's the meaning of all this double talk?"

The old man leaned back and I swear he seemed kind of disappointed. He said, "It's just that you and Claude are going to be married."

I opened my mouth to speak and nothing came out. Finally, I managed to stammer, "You mean you've looked into the future and seen us *married*? How many kids we're going to have and everything like that?"

"Well, not everything," he said. "All things in the future aren't clear to us. Only certain main-line developments. And we can't see too far into the future for most things. The past is easier. That's been fixed immovably."

"And what if we don't want to?" asked Claude.

"Yeah," I said. "What about that?" But I have to admit the idea wasn't totally repulsive. As I've said, Claude looked like Sidney Harch, only younger. He had something—you can call it animal magnetism if you wish.

The old man just smiled. "Miss Carlysle," he said, "do you honestly object to—"

"As long as I'm going to be in the family you can call me Jean," I said.

I was beginning to feel fatalistic

about the whole thing. My great aunt Harriet was a prescient and I'd had experience with them. Now I was remembering the time she told me my kitty was going to die and I hid it in the old cistern and that night it rained and filled the cistern. Naturally the kitty drowned. I never forgave her for not telling me how the kitty was going to die.

Old Williams looked at me and said, "At least *you're* being reasonable."

"I'm not," said Claude.

So I told them about my great aunt Harriet.

"It's the nature of things," said Williams. "Why can't you be as reasonable as she's being, son?"

Claude just sat there with the original stone face.

"Am I so repulsive?" I asked.

He looked at me then. Really looked. I tell you I got warm under it. I know I'm not repulsive. Finally, I guess I blushed.

"You're not repulsive," he said.

"I just object to having my whole life ordered out for me like a chess set up."

Stalemate. We sat there for a minute or so, completely silent. Presently Williams turned to me and said, "Well, Miss Carlysle, I presume you're curious about what's going on here."

"I'm not a moron," I said. "This is one of the *Nothing Preserves*."

"Correct," he said. "Only it's more than that. Your education includes the knowledge of how our

talents developed from radiation mutants. Does it also include the knowledge of what happens to extremes from the norm?"

Every schoolkid knows that, of course. So I told him. Sure I knew that the direction of development was toward the average. That genius' parents tend to have children less smart than they are. This is just general information.

Then the old man threw me the twister. "The talents are disappearing, my dear," he said.

I just sat there and thought about that for awhile. Certainly I knew it'd been harder lately to get a 'porter, even one of the old gent kind.

"Each generation has more children without talents or with talents greatly dulled," said Williams. "We will never reach a point where there are absolutely none, but what few remain will be needed for special jobs in the public interest."

"You mean if I have kids they're liable to be *Nothings*?" I asked.

"Look at your own family," he said. "Your great aunt was a prescient. Have there been any others in your family?"

"Well, no, but—"

"The prescient talent is an extreme," he said. "There are fewer than a thousand left. There are nine of us in my category. I believe you refer to us as the *Big All*."

"But we've got to do something!" I said. "The world'll just go to pot!"

"We are doing something," he said. "Right here and on eight other preserves scattered around the world. "We're reviving the mechanical and tool skills which supported the pretalent civilization and we're storing the instruments which will make a rebirth of that civilization possible."

He raised a warning hand. "But we must move in secrecy. The world's not yet ready for this information. It would cause a most terrible panic if this were to become known."

"Well, you're prescient. What does happen?" I asked him.

"Unfortunately, none of us are able to determine that," he said. "Either it's an unfixed line or there's some interference which we can't surmount." He shook his head and the goatee wiggled. "There's a cloudy area in the near future beyond which we can't see. None of us."

That scared me. A prescient may give you the creeps, but it's nice to know there's a future into which someone can see. It was as if there suddenly wasn't any future—period. I began to cry a little.

"And our children will be *Nothings*," I said.

"Well, not exactly," said Williams. "Some of them, maybe, but we've taken the trouble of comparing your gene lines—yours and Claude's. You've a good chance of having offspring who will be prescient or telepathic or both. A better than seventy percent chance."

His voice got pleading. "The world's going to need that chance."

Claude came over and put a hand on my shoulder. It sent a delicious tingle up my spine. Suddenly, I got a little flash of his thoughts—a picture of us kissing. I'm not really a tele, but like I said, sometimes I get glimmers.

Claude said, "Okay. I guess there's no sense fighting the inevitable. We'll get married."

No more argument. We all traipsed into another room and there was a preacher with everything ready for us, even the ring. Another prescient. He'd come more than a hundred miles to perform the ceremony, he said.

Afterward, I let Claude kiss me once. I was having trouble realizing that I was married. Mrs. Claude Williams. But that's the way it is with the inevitable, I guess.

The old man took my arm then and said there was one small precaution. I'd be going off the grounds from time to time and there'd always be the chance of some unethical tele picking my brains.

They put me under an anesthetic and when I came out of it I had a silver grid in my skull. It itched some, but they said that it would go away. I'd heard of this thing. They called it a blanket.

Mensor Williams said, "Now go home and get your things. You won't need to tell your parents any more than that you have a govern-

ment job. Come back as soon as you're able."

"Get me a 'porter," I said.

"The grounds are gridded against teleporters," he said. "I'll have to send you in a jet buggy."

And so he did.

I was home in ten minutes.

I went up the stairs to my house. It was after nine o'clock by then. My father was waiting inside the door.

"A fine time for an eighteen-year-old girl to be coming home!" he shouted and he made a tele stab at my mind to see what I'd been up to. These teles and their ethics! Well, he ran smack dab into the blanket and maybe you think that didn't set him back on his heels. He got all quiet suddenly.

I said, "I have a government job. I just came back for my things." Time enough to tell them about the marriage later. They'd have kicked up a fine rumpus if I'd said anything then.

Mama came in and said, "My little baby with a government job! How much does it pay?"

I said, "Let's not be vulgar."

Papa sided with me. "Of course not, Hazel," he said. "Leave the kid alone. A government job! What do you know! Those things pay plenty. Where is it, baby?"

I could see him wondering how much he could tap me for to pay his bills and I began to wonder if I'd have any money at all to keep up the pretense. I said, "The job's at Sonoma Preserve."

Papa said, "What they need with a pyro up there?"

I got a brilliant inspiration. I said, "To keep the *Notbings* in line. A little burn here, a little burn there. You know."

That struck my father funny. When he could stop laughing he said, "I know you, honey. I've watched your think tank pretty close. You'll take care of yourself and no funny business. Do they have nice safe quarters for you up there?"

"The safest," I said.

I felt him take another prod at my blanket and withdraw. "Government work is top secret," I said.

"Sure. I understand," he said.

So I went to my room and got my things packed. The folks made some more fuss about my going away so sudden, but they quieted down when I told them I had to go at once or lose the chance at the job.

Papa finally said, "Well, if the government isn't safe, then nothing is."

They kissed me goodbye and I promised to write and to visit home on my first free weekend.

"Don't worry, Papa," I said.

The jet buggy took me back to the preserve. When I went into the office, Claude, my husband, was sitting across the desk from his father.

The old man had his hands to his forehead and there were beads of perspiration showing where the fingers didn't cover. Presently, he

lowered his hands and shook his head.

"Well?" asked Claude.

"Not a thing," said the old man.

I moved a little bit into the room but they didn't notice me.

"Tell me the truth, Dad," said Claude. "How far ahead did you see us?"

Old Mensor Williams lowered his head and sighed. "All right, son," he said. "You deserve the truth. I saw you meet Miss Carlyle at the Tavern and not another thing. We had to trace her by old-fashioned methods and compare your gene lines like I said. The rest is truth. You know I wouldn't lie to you."

I cleared my throat and they both looked at me.

Claude jumped out of his chair and faced me. "We can get an annulment," he said. "No one has the right to play with other peoples' lives like that."

He looked so sweet and little-boy-like standing there. I knew suddenly I didn't want an annulment. I said, "The younger genera-

tion has to accept its responsibilities sometime."

Mensor Williams got an eager look in his eyes. I turned to the old man, said, "Was that seventy percent figure correct?"

"Absolutely correct, my dear," he said. "We've checked every marriageable female he's met because he carries my family's dominant line. Your combination was the best. Far higher than we'd hoped for."

"Is there anything else you can tell us about our future?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's all cloudy," he said. "You're on your own."

I got that creepy feeling again and looked up at my husband. Little laugh wrinkles creased at the corners of Claude's eyes and he smiled. Then another thought struck me. If we were on our own, that meant we were shaping our own future. It wasn't fixed. And no nosey prescient could come prying in on us, either. A woman kind of likes that idea. Especially on her wedding night.



you
got
to
have
brains

by . . . Robert Bloch

The mysterious Mr. Goofy was building something. An A-bomb? A spaceship? Stakowsky knew—and he hadn't a brain in his head.

MUST HAVE been about a year ago, give or take a month, when Mr. Goofy first showed up here on the street.

We get all kinds here, you know—thousands of bums and winos floating in and out every day of the year. Nobody knows where they come from and nobody cares where they go. They sleep in flophouses, sleep in bars, and in doorways—sleep right out in the gutter if you let 'em. Just so's they get their kicks. Wine jags, shot-an'-beers, canned heat, reefers—there was one guy, he used to go around and bust up thermometers and drink the juice, so help me!

When you work behind the bar, like me, you get so you hardly notice people any more. But this Mr. Goofy was different.

He come in one night in winter, and the joint was almost empty. Most of the regulars, right after New Year's, they get themselves jugged and do ninety. Keeps 'em out of the cold.

So it was quiet when Mr. Goofy showed up, around supper time. He didn't come to the bar, even though he was all alone. He headed

Few indeed are the science fantasy writers who can swing on a golden trapeze—and with miraculous ease—from the Pleiades and the blue infinite to flophouses and murder in a gin mill setting. When the amazing Robert Bloch is determined to terrify us as he did in THE SCARF and YOURS TRULY, JACK THE RIPPER we can only lean back in awe and let his incredible brilliance speak for itself. A fantasy chiller this, by a top-echelon craftsman in the genre.

straight for a back booth, plunks down, and asks Ferd for a couple of hamburgers. That's when I noticed him.

What's so screwy about that? Well, it's because he was lugging about ten or fifteen pounds of scrap metal with him, that's why. He banged it down in the booth alongside him and sat there with his hands held over it like he was one of them guards at Fort Knock or wherever.

I mean, he had all this here dirty scrap metal—tin and steel and twisted old engine parts covered with mud. He must have dug it out of the dumps around Canal Street, someplace like that. So when I got a chance I come down to this end of the bar and looked this character over. He sure was a sad one.

He was only about five feet high and weighed about a hunnerd pounds, just a little dried-up futz of a guy. He had a kind of a bald head and he wore old twisted-up glasses with the earpieces all bent, and he had trouble with the hamburgers on account of his false choppers. He was dressed in them War Surplus things—leftovers from World War I, yet. And a cap.

Go out on the street right now and you'll see plenty more just like him, but Mr. Goofy was different. Because he was *clean*. Sure, he looked beat-up, but even his old duds was neat.

Another thing. While he waited for the hamburgers he kept writing stuff. He had this here pencil and

notebook out and he was scribbling away for dear life. I got the idea he was figuring out some kind of arithametics.

Well, I was all set to ask him the score when somebody come in and I got busy. It happens that way; next thing I know the whole place was crowded and I forgot all about Mr. Goofy for maybe two hours. Then I happen to look over and by gawd if he ain't still sitting there, with that pencil going like crazy!

Only by this time the old juke is blasting, and he kind of frowns and takes his time like he didn't care for music but was, you know, concentrated on his figures, like.

He sees me watching him and wiggles his fingers like so, and I went over there and he says, "Pardon me—but could you lower the volume of that instrument?"

Just like that he says it, with a kind of funny accent I can't place. But real polite and fancy for a foreigner.

So I says, "Sure, I'll switch it down a little." I went over and fiddled with the control to cut it down, like we do late at night.

But just then Stakowsky come up to me. This Stakowsky used to be a wheel on the street—owned two-three flophouses and fleabag hotels, and he comes in regular to get loaded. He was kind of mean, but a good spender.

Well, Stakowsky come up and he stuck his big red face over the bar and yelled. "Whassa big idea,

Jack? I puts in my nickel, I wanna hear my piece. You wanna busted nose or something?"

Like I say, he was a mean type.

I didn't know right off what to tell him, but it turned out I didn't have to tell him nothing. Because the little guy in the booth stood up and he tapped Stakowsky on the shoulder and said, real quiet, "Pardon me, but it was I who requested that the music be made softer."

Stakowsky turned around and he said, "Yeah? And who in hell you think you are—somebody?"

The little guy said, "You know me. I rented the top of the loft from you yesterday."

Stakowsky looks at him again and then he says, "Awright. So you rent. So you pay a month advance. Awright. But that ain't got to do with how I play music. I want it should be turned up, so me and my friends can hear it good."

By this time the number is over and half the bar has come down to get in on the deal. They was all standing around waiting for the next pitch.

The little guy says, "You don't understand, Mr. Stakowsky. It happens I am doing some very important work and require freedom from distraction."

I bet Stakowsky never heard no two-dollar words before. He got redder and redder and at last he says, "You don't understand so good, neither. You wanna figure, go by your loft. Now I turn up the

music. Are you gonna try and stop me?" And he takes a swipe at the little futz with his fist.

Little guy never batted an eye. He just sort of ducked, and when he come up again he had a shiv in his hand. But it wasn't no regular shiv, and it wasn't nothing he found in no junk-heap.

This one was about a foot long, and sharp. The blade was sharp and the tip was sharp, and the little guy didn't look like he was just gonna give Stakowsky a shave with it.

Stakowsky, he didn't think so either. He whitened up fast and backed away to the bar and he says, "All right, all right," over and over again.

It happened all in a minute, and then the knife was gone and the little guy picked up his scrap metal and walked out without even looking back once.

Then everybody was hollering, and I poured Stakowsky a fast double, and then another. Of course he made off like he hadn't been scared and he talked plenty loud—but we all knew.

"Goofy," he says. "That's who he is. Mister Goofy. Sure, he rents from me. You know, by the Palace Rooms, where I live. He rents the top—a great big loft up there. Comes yesterday, a month rent in advance he pays too. I tell him, 'Mister, you're goofy. What do you want with such a big empty loft? A loft ain't no good in winter, unless you want to freeze. Why you

don't take a nice warm room downstairs by the steam heat?' But no, he wants the loft, and I should put up a cot for him. So I do, and he moves in last night."

Stakowsky got red in the face. "All day today that Mr. Goofy, he's bringing up his crazy outfits. Iron and busted machinery, stuff like that. I ask him what he's doing and he says he's building. I ask him what he's building and he says—well, he just don't say. You saw how he acted tonight? Now you know. He's goofy in the head. I ain't afraid of no guys, but those crazy ones you got to watch out for. Lofts and machinery and knives—you ever hear anything like that Mr. Goofy?"

So that's how he got his name. And I remembered him. One of the reasons was, I was staying at the Palace Rooms myself. Not in the flops, but a nice place on the third floor, right next to Stakowsky's room. And right upstairs from us was this loft. An attic, like. I never went up there, but there was a stairs in back.

The next couple of days I kept my eyes open, figuring on seeing Mr. Goofy again. But I didn't. All I did was hear him. Nights, he kept banging and pounding away, him and his scrap metal or whatever it was, and he moved stuff across the floor. Me, I'm a pretty sound sleeper and Stakowsky was always loaded when he turned in, so it didn't bother him neither. But Mr. Goofy never seemed to sleep. He was

always working up there. And on what?

I couldn't figure it out. Day after day he'd come in and out with some more metal. I don't know where he got it all, but he must have lugged up a couple of thousand pounds, ten or fifteen each trip. It got to bothering me because it was the sort of a mystery you feel you've got to know more about.

Next time I saw him was when he started coming into the place regular, to eat. And always he had the pencil and notebook with him. He took the same booth every night—and nobody bothered him with loud music after the story got around about him and his shiv.

He'd just sit there and figure and mumble to himself and walk out again, and pretty soon they were making up all kinds of stories about the guy.

Some said he was a Red on account of that accent, you know, and he was building one of them there at-omic bombs. One of the winos says no, he passed the place one night about four ayem and he heard a big clank like machinery working. He figured Mr. Goofy was a counterfitter. Which was the kind of crazy idea you'd expect from a wino.

Anyways, the closest anybody come was Manny Schreiber from the hock shop, and he guessed Goofy was a inventor and maybe he was building a rowbot. You know, a rowbot, like in these sci-

entist magazines. Mechanical men, they run by machinery.

One day, about an hour before I went on shift, I was sitting in my room when Stakowsky knocked on the door. "Come on," he says. "Mr. Goofy just went out. I'm gonna take a look around up there."

Well, I didn't care one way or the other. Stakowsky, he was the landlord, and I figured he had a right. So we sneaked up and he used his key and we went inside the loft.

It was a big barn of a place with a cot in the corner. Next to the cot was a table with a lot of notes piled up, and maybe twenty-five or thirty books. Foreign books they were, and I couldn't make out the names. In the other corners there were piles of scrap metal and what looked like a bunch of old radio sets from a repair shop.

And in the center of the room was this machine. At least, it looked like a machine, even though it must have been thirty feet long. It was higher than my head, too. And there was a door in it, and you could get inside the machinery that was all tangled up on the sides and sit down in a chair. In front of the chair was a big board with a lot of switches on it.

And everywhere was gears and pistons and coils and even glass tubes. Where he picked up all that stuff, I dunno. But he'd patched it all together somehow and when you looked at it—it made sense.

I mean, you could tell the machine would *do* something, if you could only figure out what.

Stakowsky looked at me and I looked at him and we both looked at the machine.

"That Mr. Goofy!" says Stakowsky. "He does all this in a month. You know something, Jack?"

"What?" I says.

"You tell anybody else and I'll kill you. But I'm scared to even come near Mr. Goofy. This machine of his, I don't like it. Tomorrow his month is up. I'm going to tell him he should move. Get out. I don't want crazy people around here."

"But how'll he move this thing out?"

"I don't care how. Tomorrow he gets the word. And I'm going to have Lippy and Stan and the boys here. He don't pull no knife on me again. Out he goes."

We went downstairs and I went to work. All night long I tried to figure that machine of his. There wasn't much else to do, because there was a real blizzard going and nobody came in.

I kept remembering the way the machine looked. It had a sort of framework running around the outside, and if it got covered over with some metal it would be like a submarine or one of them rockets. And there was a part inside, where a big glass globe connected up to some wires leading to the switchboard, or whatever it was.

And a guy could sit in there. It all made some kind of crazy sense.

I sat there, thinking it over, until along about midnight. Then Mr. Goofy came in.

This time he didn't head for his booth. He come right up to the bar and sat down on a stool. His face was red, and he brushed snow off his coat. But he looked happy.

"Do you have any decent brandy?" he asked.

"I think so," I told him. I found a bottle and opened it up.

"Will you be good enough to have a drink with me?"

"Sure, thanks," I looked at him. "Celebrating?"

"That's right," says Mr. Goofy. "This is a great occasion. My work is finished. Tonight I put on the sheaths. Now I am almost ready to demonstrate."

"Demonstrate what?"

Well, he dummied up on me right away. I poured him another drink and another, and he just sat there grinning. Then he sort of loosened up. That brandy was plenty powerful.

"Look," he says. "I will tell you all about it. You have been kind to me, and I can trust you. Besides, it is good to share a moment of triumph."

He says, "So long I have worked, but soon they will not laugh at me any more. Soon the smart Americans, the men over here who call themselves Professors, will take note of my work. They did not believe me when I offered to show

them my plans. They would not accept my basic theory. But I knew I was right. I knew I could do it. Part of it must be mechanical, yes. But the most important part is the mind itself. You know what I told them? To do this, and to do it right, you've got to have brains."

He sort of chuckled, and poured another drink. "Yes. That is the whole secret. More than anything else, you need brains. Not mechanical formula alone. But when I spoke of harnessing the mind, powering it with mental energy rather than physical, they laughed. Now we'll see."

I bought myself a drink, and I guess he realized I wasn't in on the pitch, because he says, "You don't understand, do you?"

I shook my head.

"What would you say, my friend, if I told you I have just successfully completed the construction of the first practical spaceship?"

Oh-oh, I thought to myself. Mr. Goofy!

"But not a model, not a theory in metal—an actual, practical machine for travel to the moon?"

Mr. Goofy and his knife, I thought. Making a crazy thing out of old scrap iron. Mr. Goofy!

"If I wish, I can go tonight," he said. "Or tomorrow. Any time. No astronomy. No calculus. Mental energy is the secret. Harness the machinery to a human brain and it will be guided automatically to its destination in a moment, if

properly controlled. That's all it takes—a single instant. Long enough to direct the potential energy of the cortex."

Maybe you think it's funny the way I can remember all those big words, but I'll never forget anything Mr. Goofy said.

And he told me, "Who has ever estimated the power of the human brain—its unexploited capacity for performance? Using the machine for autohypnosis, the brain is capable of tremendous effort. The electrical impulses can be stepped up, magnified ten millionfold. Atomic energy is insignificant in comparison. Now do you see what I have achieved?"

I thought about it for a minute or so—him sitting there all steamed up over his dizzy junk-heap. Then I remembered what was happening to him tomorrow.

I just didn't have the heart to let him go on and on about how his life-work was realized, and how he'd be famous in Europe and America and he'd reach the moon and all that crud. I didn't have the heart. He was so little and so whacky. Mr. Goofy!

So I says, "Look, I got to tell you something. Stakowsky, he's bouncing you out tomorrow. That's right. He's gonna kick you and your machine into the street. He says he can't stand it around."

"Machine?" says Mr. Goofy. "What does he know of my machine?"

Well, I had to tell him then.

I had to. About how we went upstairs and looked.

"Before the sheath was on, you saw?" he asked.

"That's the way it was," I told him. "I saw it, and so did Stakowsky. And he'll kick you out."

"But he cannot! I mean, I chose this spot carefully, so I could work unobserved. I need privacy. And I cannot move the ship now. I must bring people to see it when I make the announcement. I must make the special arrangements for the tests. It is a very delicate matter. Doesn't he understand? He'll be famous, too, because of what happened in his miserable hole of a place—"

"He's probably famous tonight," I said. "I'll bet he's down the street somewheres right now, blabbing about you and your machine, and how he's gonna toss you out."

Mr. Goofy looked so sad I tried to make a joke. "What's the matter with you? You say yourself it works by brain-power. So use your brain and move it someplace else. Huh?"

He looked even sadder. "Don't you realize it is designed only for space-travel? And properly, my brain must be free to act as the control agent. Still, you are right about that man. He is a wicked person, and he hates me. I must do something. I wonder if—"

Then you know what he does, this Mr. Goofy? He whips out his pencil and notebook and starts figuring. Just sits there and scribbles away. And he says, "Yes, it

is possible. Change the wires leading to the controls. It is only a matter of a few moments. And what better proof could I ask than an actual demonstration? Yes. It is fated to be this way. Good."

Then he stood up and stuck out his mitt. "Goodbye, Jack," he says. "And thank you for your suggestion."

"What suggestion?"

But he doesn't answer me, and then he's out the door and gone.

I closed up the joint about one-thirty. The boss wasn't around and I figured what the hell, it was a blizzard.

There was nobody out on the street this time of night, not with that wind off the lake and the snow coming down about a foot a minute. I couldn't see in front of my face.

I crossed the street in front of the Palace Rooms—it must have been quarter to two or thereabouts—and all of a sudden it happened.

Whoom!

Like that it goes, a big loud blast you can hear even over the wind and the blizzard. On account of the snow being so thick I couldn't see nothing. But let me tell you, I sure heard it.

At first I thought maybe it was some kind of explosion, so I quick-run across to the Palace and up the stairs. All the winos in the flops was asleep—those guys, they get a jag on and they'll sleep even if you set fire to the mattress. But I

had to find out if anything was wrong.

I didn't smell no smoke and my room was okay, and it was all quiet in the hall. Except that the back door leading to the attic was open, and the air was cold.

Right away I figured maybe Mr. Goofy had pulled something off, so I run up the stairs. And I saw it.

Mr. Goofy was gone. The junk was still scattered all over the room, but he'd burned all his notes and he was gone. The great big machine, or space-ship, or whatever it was—that was gone, too.

How'd he get it out of the room and where did he take it? You can search me, brother.

All I know is there was a big charred spot burned away in the center of the floor where the machine had stood. And right above there was a big round hole punched smack through the roof of the loft.

So help me, I just stood there. What else could I do? Mr. Goofy *said* he built a space-ship that could take him to the moon. He *said* he could go there in a flash, just like that. He *said* all it took was brains.

And what do I know about this here auto-hypnosis deal, or whatever he called it, and about electricity-energy, and force-fields, and all that stuff?

He was gone. The machine or ship was gone. And there was this awful hole in the roof. That's all I knew.

Maybe Stakowsky would know the rest. It was worth a try, any-

how. So I run down to Stakowsky's room.

After that, things didn't go so good.

The cops started to push me around when they got there, and if it hadn't been for my boss putting the old pressure on, they'd have given me a real rough time. But they could see I was sorta like out of my head—and I was, too, for about a week.

I kept yelling about this Mr. Goofy and his crazy invention and his big knife and his trip to the moon, and it didn't make no sense to the cops. Of course, nothing ever made any sense to them, and they had to drop the whole case—hush it up. The whole thing was too screwy to ever let leak out.

Anyhow, I felt rugged until I moved out of the Palace Rooms and got back to work. Now I scarcely ever think about Mr. Goofy any more, or Stakowsky—or the whole cockeyed mess.

I don't like to think about the mess.

The mess was when I ran down the stairs that night and looked for Stakowsky in his room. He was there all right but he didn't care about Goofy or the trip to the moon or the hole in his loft roof, either.

Because he was very, very dead.

And Mr. Goofy's foot-long knife was laying right next to him on the bed. So that part was easy to figure out. Mr. Goofy come right back there from the tavern, and he killed him.

But after that?

After that, your guess is as good as mine. The cops never found out a bit—not even Mr. Goofy's real name, or where he come from, or where he got this here theory about space-ships and power to run them.

Did he really have a invention that would take him to the moon? Could he change some wires and controls and just scoot off through the roof with his mental energy hooked up?

Nobody knows. Nobody ever will know. But I can tell you this.

There was a mess, one awful mess, in Stakowsky's room. Mr. Goofy must have taken his knife and gone to work on Stakowsky's head. There was nothing left on top but a big round hole, and it was empty.

Stakowsky's head was empty.

Mr. Goofy took out what was inside and fixed his machine and went to the moon.

That's all.

Like Mr. Goofy says, you got to have brains . . .

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FU 61

preview

by . . . Frank Belknap Long

Mr. Scanlon had reasons of his own for insisting on a preview. But what they were nobody knows!

"WHAT EVERY discerning theatergoer is searching for," said Mr. Scanlon, "is a kind of sixth-sense heightening of perception. I choose to call it a superseding experience—a blotting out of the mundane and familiar and the substitution of the totally unexpected. In short, a superior vision of reality. Stella, you see, is a 'stripped' actress."

Mr. Scanlon looked about him, and smiled. "No, gentlemen. I'm not being Rabelaisian, or thinking of the burlesque stage. She's a 'stripped' actress in the sense that the kind of realism I've been talking about is her guiding star. Everything else—every shred of romantic or sentimental tinsel—has been stripped away."

"But, Mr. Scanlon! Surely—"

"Gentlemen, I think you'll agree that her first liaison with Hollywood has carried her to heights undreamed of in your philosophy—if drama critics can legitimately be said to possess a philosophy."

"But, Mr. Scanlon—"

"Gentlemen, be patient. Relax. You'll never see another preview like this, and you must enjoy it to the full. There go the lights."

The lights dimmed and the

Have you ever sat in a movie theater and permitted your imagination to take you far beyond the events depicted on the screen? Perhaps we all do this at times. But this tragedy in minuscule should give you pause and cure you of the habit forever. The flying saucer folk may just happen to be watching you.

long, cinemascopic screen brimmed with a deep-toned miracle of radiance.

Into the Black Hills on a white charger rode Robert Mitchum. The epoch which was to resound with his deeds of valor was not immediately determinable. But from the peaceful aspect of the landscape everyone took it for granted that it was B.C. (Before Custer)—until the new techniques of sound dispersal which convey an illusion of torment in depth went into action. From every nook and cranny of the theater rifles cracked in ear-splitting synchronization.

It was no run-of-the-hill Western. Every part was played to perfection, against the kind of historically realistic background that had made "Shane" and a scant dozen lesser pictures classics of their kind.

The critics flanking Mr. Scanlon realized this, and unlimbering their fastidious brows they started scribbling.

"There she is," said Mr. Scanlon. "Gentlemen, this should be your most rewarding moment."

Into the center of that scenic magnificence stepped Stella. Her blonde loveliness was peculiarly her very own, and it was easy to see that everything was just right for her.

"No powder, no cream, no lipstick," murmured Mr. Scanlon.

"But surely, Mr. Scanlon, she's made up for the screen—"

"Historically makeup would

have been an anachronism," Mr. Scanlon pointed out. "The women of that age had to get along as best they could. Remember Calamity Jane? She was as ugly as a wart-hog, but her lovers were legion."

There was a brief dimming of the radiance. And then, into the Black Hills on a pulsing shape of darkness rode—

"It's Humpty Dumpty!" someone gasped.

"No."

"No, it's got tentacles. Can't you see? They must have been shooting one of those science fiction pictures on another set. One of the extras must have strayed by accident—"

"And he's waving them. Look!"

"Good grief, how did that bomb crater get there?"

"It's unbelievable! She's changing into a seal!"

The divine Stella was indeed changing. But no seal—or mermaid—had ever gone flapping over the Western hills on eight dangling appendages, blue-green in hue.

Of course the hills were no longer the Black Hills of the Dakotas. But no one could ask Mr. Scanlon about that because he had disappeared. One moment he had been leaning forward in his seat, alert and smiling. Then he was gone. He had simply vanished—dwindled and faded into nothingness like an unstable isotope assailed by some invisible energy source.

No narrative is complete if it does not terminate with some sort of explanation. But how could

there be one when no man or woman on Earth would ever know where Mr. Scanlon went, or why he had insisted on a preview in the first place?

How could there be one when there was no one to remember—

no one to recall how *They* landed in numbers from their flat, saucer-like ships exactly one week later, and took care to strip from the minds of men all proudly treasured knowledge of the many-splendored things of Earth?

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universe
in
books

by . . . Hans Stefan Santesson

Our roving critic takes a most clairvoyant look at flying disks and little green men—with no slighting of other unusual books.

PURISTS who belong to the ray-gun and space opera schools will dislike the threat to these ways of life represented by George Adamski's new work, *INSIDE THE SPACE SHIPS* (Abelard-Schuman, \$3.50). Readers of this column will recall my obvious partiality for Adamski's earlier *FLYING SAUCERS HAVE LANDED* (1954, British Book Centre). This new book, with an introduction by the equally metaphysically minded Charlotte Blodgett, is a challenging and provocative answer to the questions many of us have raised about the Flying Saucers.

Skeptics will suggest that these are not facts—that this is straight fiction—and this may be so to the extent that fact and/or truth are definable these days. But even Adamski's critics will have to admit that this is an extraordinarily persuasive picture of what the undoubted Intelligences directing what we call "Flying Saucers" may both be and think of us.

Devotees of the bug-eyed monsters and many-tendriled gentry from planets across the void will

There can be no doubt at all that Hans Stefan Santesson maintains at all times an open mind. There may be many who will disagree with him about the merits of INSIDE THE SPACE SHIPS—the wisdom of presenting such material as factual can be debated pro and con—but in Mr. Santesson the audacious approach finds a brilliant defender. Of the several fine reviews he has written for us this is the most challenging, and we urge you not to skip single line of it.

find Adamski's Intelligences—faintly reminiscent of Lovecraft—understandably disappointing. If you accept the thinking in *INSIDE THE SPACE SHIPS* you will have to accept the thesis that it will not be we who will bring civilization to the Galaxy in years to come—it will be the citizens of Mars, Venus and Saturn who will bring to us, once we have matured as a race, their conception of the law governing the Universe.

The Venus, the Mars, the Saturn and the Moon of these visitors, the meetings with whom Adamski describes, are worlds decidedly different from the SF stereotypes of the thirties and the forties, surviving through to these days. Whether or not Adamski, in this new work, writing for the metaphysically minded as well as the layman, may perhaps have interpreted more than reported, *INSIDE THE SPACE SHIPS* remains an important and quite possibly definitive contribution to the field, if for no other reason because it is not just a hurriedly thrown together rehash of badly digested and not necessarily accurate newspaper reports.

You may quarrel with Adamski—and you will very likely disagree with him. But, at the same time and in the same breath there will be an uncomfortable moment when you will wonder if George Adamski *is* telling the truth! And—looking up at the heavens—you will wonder about the world of the Brothers that George Adamski de-

scribes, a world that was old, very old, when our Earth was young . . .

The blithe spirits that returned to St. Denis-sur-Aisne in Manning Coles' wonderful *BRIEF CANDLES* (1954, Doubleday), have returned in the equally satisfying *HAPPY RETURNS* (Doubleday, \$3.00). There are perhaps some who will question any mention of this book in a magazine devoted to Fantasy and Science Fiction, but perhaps they will agree with me that if Fantasy is a loose enough phrase to permit the reviewing under this heading of grim and a shade too macabre histories of lonely werewolves and lonelier survivors from sand-covered and long-forgotten temples in the desert, Manning Coles' delightful *HAPPY RETURNS* should also be discussed.

Relax and laugh with Charles and James Latimer in the adventure of the Educated Elephant, in the adventure of the Unhappy Ghost, as they rescue harassed Cousin Quentin from the determined Mrs. Thompson, and throughout *HAPPY RETURNS*. Recommended.

Andrew Harlan is a Technician, carefully selected and as carefully trained, whose job it is to range through past and present and later centuries monitoring and, when necessary, altering time's myriad cause-and-effect relationships to smooth out the rough spots in the long and more often tragic history of mankind. The story of how cold

and passionless Andrew Harlan falls in love with Noys is the story of the threat to Eternity reported on in Isaac Asimov's interesting *THE END OF ETERNITY* (Doubleday, \$2.95). Recommended!

Science Fiction had presented the Martians "in a thousand forms"—tall blue shadows, microscopic reptiles, gigantic insects, fireballs, ambulatory flowers, and what have you. But science fiction had very carefully avoided the cliché, and the cliché turned out to be the truth. They really *were* little green men.

"But with a difference, and *what* a difference."

Fredric Brown's rather ribald story of the Coming of the Martians in March of 1964, *MARTIANS, GO HOME* (Dutton, \$2.75), will be disturbing reading for those who prefer their SF a shade less whimsical—and ironic.

The coming of the abusive, aggravating, annoying, flippant, fresh, leering, loathsome, uncivil, yapping and generally obnoxious little green men—who had a habit of materializing where least wanted and expected—and heckled criminals, judges, lawyers and witnesses, with equal enjoyment—had interesting consequences. "The Iron Curtain quivered like an aspen leaf in an earthquake," as the leaders of the People discovered that "facts and figures, in speeches or in print, had to be honest. The Martians *loved* it when they found even the slight-

est misstatement or exaggeration, and told everybody. How could you run a government that way?"

When Yato Ishurti finally makes his dramatic speech it is to a world and a United States shaken by the Coming. In the United States, within six weeks, automobile production had been down 87 percent over the same month a year ago, and the fall to almost zero of entertainment stocks had set off the stock market crash. Fredric Brown's story of what a very disturbed World told the little green men, will definitely interest you. Recommended!

Beryl Williams and Samuel Epstein describe the pioneers of rocketry in their important *THE ROCKET PIONEERS* (Julian Messner, \$3.75), pioneers who "worked with varying degrees of skill and with various immediate purposes. Not all of them were trying to construct a rocket that would reach another world," but many "were nevertheless in their own minds working toward that day when rockets would provide man with a means of transportation into the vast realms of space." This is the story of William Congreve and his War Rocket, Jules Verne, "a legend during his own lifetime," Konstantin Eduardovitch Ziolkovsky—Pioneer Theorist, Dr. Robert Hutchings Goddard—Father of American Rocketry, Dr. Hermann Oberth, Hungarian-born mathematician and author of the pioneer-

ing "The Rocket into Interplanetary Space," the German "Society for Space Travel," the world's first really active and productive organization of rocketeers, The Peenemünde Group and the V-2, and the American Rocket Society, whose President, Andrew G. Haley, reports in the Foreword on the Society's present plans. Recommended!

Chad Oliver's *ANOTHER KIND* (Ballantine Books—35 cents) is a collection of his short stories, several of them variations on anthropological themes. You visit an America of the future in which a chief profession is the invention of new cultures. You learn what happened when the Nern edited their culture down to essentials, and learned to live in it. You learn what happened when a representative of Capella IV, who had force fields and interstellar overdrive,

was to meet the representative of Earth, who had cobalt bombs and interplanetary travel. You share the rather disturbing thinking in Elm Point, meet one of the last Martians, and go back in time to watch a representative of the Time Security Commission try to keep Dan Hughes from saving Aztec Mexico. Adult and literate SF at its best. Recommended!

RAY BRADBURY explores the fantastic and the strange in his *THE OCTOBER COUNTRY* (Ballantine Books—\$3.50), which deserves mention though it is not in the strictest sense SF. "Homecoming," "Skeleton," "Jack in the Box," "There was an old Woman," "The Cistern" are stories of people who refuse to die and of people who see things others of us do not see. They are important examples of the work of an always interesting writer. Recommended.



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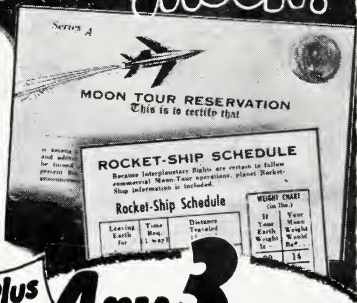
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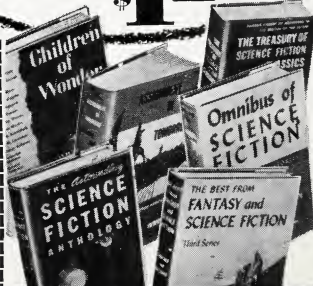
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